

# The Novels of Richard Pryce

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Christopher

Jezebel

The Burden of a Woman

Elementary Jane

# THE BURDEN OF A WOMAN

By RICHARD PRYCE

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To the little Welsh farming village of Maen Gorsedd came the English woman Mary Redwing some eight or ten years before the time when her story, as told in the book, begins. She has lived with her little daughter, quietly, industriously, happily. Then Peter Davidson comes into her life. Peter is a well-to-do farmer, into whose consciousness is growing the realization that Mary Redwing is comely and admirable above all other women and that he himself is thirty-two years old and free to marry.

An ordinary situation, apparently, and one destined to work out to an ordinary conclusion. Mary Redwing knows differently. She has heard in her heart the "Neither do I condemn thee," but she knows Peter Davidson well enough not to expect such judgment from him. So they cannot marry, and Peter turns to Hannah Rees, a woman of good family, who has lived all her life in the village. Between the two Peter learns some fine shadings in the meaning of morality.

The conclusion is satisfying, and the trenchant telling of the story makes it a delight which endures far beyond the time required to read it.

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## RICHARD PRYCE

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Although "Christopher" is the only one of his books which is widely known in this country, Mr. Pryce is not a "new novelist." In England, he has been a successful writer for many years, and the books now published in America are not the amateur attempts of a budding genius but the ripe products of a quick mentality and a carefully trained talent. "Perceptivity," one might say if asked to name the author's leading characteristic, and a whimsical tolerance which is a natural accompaniment of keen insight. As a delineator of female character Mr. Pryce has no superior. He thoroughly understands woman nature and describes with equal facility all types in all circumstances. He has a happy faculty of setting his characters in surroundings peculiarly fitted to emphasize their individuality. Jezebel is expatriated among her own people; Elementary Jane keeps her simplicity in the artificial light of a London music hall; Mary Redwing clings to her standards in the midst of the narrow ideals of a little Welsh village. They are all superbly human.







By Richard Pryce

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CHRISTOPHER.

JEZEBEL.

ELEMENTARY JANE.

THE BURDEN OF A WOMAN.

HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY

BOSTON AND NEW YORK

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*The Riverside Press Cambridge*





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## CHAPTER I

IN the village of Maen Gorsedd, in a Welsh border-county, there lived, some years ago, a woman of lowly station, who was known as Mrs. Redwing. She supported herself and her little daughter by dressmaking, millinery, ironing, and the like, and supplemented her income on market-days by tending the children of such of her neighbours as business took to the neighbouring town.

The number of her charges on those days fluctuated with circumstances, but rarely was there a Monday which did not see a child or two entrusted to her care.

The institution of the weekly *crèche* came of seeing Mrs. Owen, of Maen Gorsedd Lane, trudging off to Borderhampton with her fat baby on one arm and her heavy basket of butter and eggs on the other.

"Takin' her in to market?" Mrs. Redwing said, from her gate, in her English voice that was beginning to acquire a Welsh intonation.

"I am, indeed," said Mrs. Owen. "I did mean to leave her with Lucy, but Lucy was to go to help in



the fields this mornin' ; an', indeed, I was afraid of the sun, an' thought I am rather carry her all the way myself than not be sure she was bein' looked after."

"Will you leave her with me?"

"O — oh!" said Mrs. Owen.

"Why not?"

"Indeed, I don't like to trouble you."

"I shall be in the house all day," said Mrs. Redwing.

"Well, indeed, I don't know."

The child was very heavy. It was four miles to Borderhampton and the sun was hot. She availed herself of Mrs. Redwing's offer.

In the evening, when Mrs. Owen returned for the baby, Mrs. Redwing would accept nothing for her pains.

"It was no trouble," she said pleasantly. "I was in all day sewin', and it was just as easy for me to have her here as not. You bring her to me just as often as you like, Mrs. Owen, and I'll mind her for you and welcome."

Mrs. Owen demurred. In the course of the week she returned. She had an idea. What would Mrs. Redwing think of minding one or two? Mrs. Roberts and Mrs. Evans and she had been comparing notes. They were often at a loss to know what to do with the little ones on market-days.

"An', indeed," said Mrs. Owen, in conclusion, "if you could see your way to it — an' it must be on a right, square footin' — we'd all be very thankful."

The thing was established.

"I do feel as safe again," Mrs. Roberts said, one August morning, "now I leave baby with you, Mrs. Redwing. I can take my chickens in to Borderhampton an' never fret fear Jenny was let him get near the fire. You'll careful not to let him suck the paint off his soldier, won't you?"

Mrs. Redwing promised.

A young woman passed jauntily up the village street.

"That Hughes girl gets bolder-looking every day, I believe," said Mrs. Roberts, gazing after her. "She a right bad one, I think."

Mrs. Redwing was silent.

"Well, I must be gettin' on. Here's Mrs. Effance, bringin' Johnny. Mornin', Mrs. Effance."

"Mornin', Mrs. Roberts. Mornin', Mrs. Redwing. Will you please to mind Johnny to-day?"

"See that girl Hughes go by?" asked Mrs. Roberts, who seemed in a mood for gossip.

"I wonder she stops in Maen Gorsedd," said Mrs. Evans

"H'm! she's none too particular what's thought of her."

Mrs. Roberts pursed her mouth sententiously. "Light o' love! There's too many of them about. What do you say, Mrs. Redwing?"

But Mrs. Redwing had gone with the first child into the house. She returned presently. The talk had turned to Mrs. Evans's little boy.

“An’ if he’s troublesome, Mrs. Redwing, you smack him—I can trust you not to hurt him. He’s been a naughty boy, Johnny. Naughty. Would n’t eat his bread an’ milk, and spilt it on his pinny, as I did put on clean. Mrs. Roberts shocked at you! Well, then, go to Mrs. Redwing and be a good boy till mother comes home. And I’ve brought some things, Mrs. Redwing; if you could please to iron them against I get back or else to-morrer’d do; and Peggy could bring ’m p’r’aps.”

Peggy was Mrs. Redwing’s daughter. Mrs. Redwing promised to see what could be done.

“An’ this is what I owe you for last week,” said Mrs. Evans, opening her big leathern purse; “and I’ve brought you a bit of honey. Peggy likes it, I know, and our bees have done wonderful this year.”

Mrs. Evans and Mrs. Roberts went their way into the town.

Mrs. Redwing, holding Johnny’s little fist in one hand and in the other the large cabbage-leaf on which lay the piece of honeycomb, looked after them. A slight frown passed away from her forehead. People were very good to her.

The village lay in a wide valley. The chapel was the only ugly thing in it. The houses were low-roofed, some of them gabled, many of them thatched, and the gardens were full of flowers. The presence of a few limes close by Mary’s cottage, in the uneven street, and of many hives in the immediate vicinity,

accounted for the hum of wings that made, just then, a background of sound to all sound.

"There's bees there that made this, perhaps," Mrs. Redwing said, glancing at the honey and then up into the trees; "unless," she added, after a pause, and looking down at Johnny Evans, "unless your mother smokes them. You don't know, Johnny. You're not old enough. And so you were naughty to-day, were you, and wouldn't eat your bread and milk? Kiss me, then, and be a good boy all the time till mother comes back and she'll forgive you. Oh, you dear little round fat thing. Don't your mother love you all she knows?"

Peggy ran out; a little girl of unusual grace and beauty. The sun sparkled in her wayward hair. Mrs. Redwing entrusted the child to her own and went into the house.

She put away the honey in a cupboard, saw that Mrs. Roberts's baby, who was crawling after a kitten, could get into no mischief, and went about her duties. She had some dressmaking to do before she could begin the ironing for Mrs. Evans; accordingly, having finished such small domestic arrangements as required her attention, she seated herself at her sewing-machine by the window.

The click of the wheels and the jerking of the shuttle drowned then the humming of the bees, but at every pause, for the cutting of a thread, or the examining of the work, the mellow droning insisted that it was permanent, while other noises, were they

of spasmodic machine, or passing cart, or human voice, were transient.

Mrs. Redwing worked steadily and with few interruptions till her task was done, by which time the clock on the church tower was striking twelve and she set about preparing the midday meal.

Johnny Evans and Mrs. Roberts's baby were put to sleep after dinner. Mrs. Redwing pinned up her work in a newspaper — "The Borderhampton Weekly News and Maen Gorsedd Chronicle" — and despatched Peggy with it — the parcel well-nigh as big as the bearer — to the New Farm on the hill. Then she spread her ironing-blanket upon the table, fetched from the pump in the garden a bowl of water wherewith to sprinkle the linen, and put her irons to heat at the fire, while she washed up the things that had been used at dinner.

Soon it was the sound of the iron that played against the humming of the bees, and then thereto was added the humming of Mrs. Redwing herself. She hummed an air over many times. Some words she had read somewhere were running in her head. Presently she found herself singing. She had fitted the words unconsciously to the air, and they ran smoothly together in double harness —

" Oh, tell me whence love cometh!  
Love comes uncalled, unsent.  
Oh, tell me where love goeth!  
That was not love that went."

When she had sung the verse once, she sung it



again, and then again, and again even after that. Her voice had little power, but it was very sweet and true. She broke the time, now and then, to suit her movements as she worked — prolonging a note while she pressed strongly on a white collar or cuff, or hurrying an interval as she stooped to rub the hot surface of the iron upon the rug before holding it, for an instant, to her face to test the heat. There was a pleasant smell of scorching which proceeded not from the linen (that was white as driven snow), but from the duster with which she polished the hot metal before running it firmly and smoothly over the clothes.

Mary Redwing was as comely a young woman as was to be seen for many a mile round. So thought Peter Davidson, who stood for some moments at the window observing her before he made his presence known to her. She was of a fair height and a supple but ample figure. Her bosom showed curves that were little short of beautiful under the black cotton dress. The line of her unbleached apron marked the neat proportions of her waist. Her dark hair was straightly parted and drawn off a low forehead, and she had a habit of smoothing it lightly back with the tips of her fingers. It was brown and glossy and ignorant of the touch of the oils and pomades with which Mrs. Owen pasted hers down, as it was of the curling-tongs, with which that of Mrs. Roberts was, once a week, burnt and twisted. Her eyes were grey and gentle in their expression. The village was not observant, or it might have noticed that the serenity

of their outlook from under the level eyebrows was a thing of gradual acquisition. A stranger, riding through the village one day and encountering by chance the peaceful gaze of Mary Redwing, found himself seeking a phrase to express the meaning that he attached to it. It had the calmness, he thought, that in nature succeeds a tempest. It made him think of the years of recuperative rest that are vouchsafed in the end to a land long harassed by war. He was a poet in his way, and he made, in his pocket-book, a couple of notes for later development. His ideas were scarcely formulated. He wrote in pencil, ". . . that are at peace, and have looked on sorrow," and the words, "desired haven." These last he erased some days later when the verse he had vaguely been thinking of arrested his wandering attention one Sunday morning in church. He scribbled a number and a date upon his shirtcuff and afterwards wrote therefrom in his notebook, "Then are they glad because they are at rest ; and so He bringeth them unto the haven where they would be."

Whether he ever made use of his memoranda I know not. He was a man of many beginnings. But I know that on his return from the ride, in the course of which he had remarked the face that had so deeply impressed him, he spoke of it to his hostess. He was staying at the neighbouring Castle of Maen Gorsedd.

"You must mean Mary Redwing," Lady Llandrindod said, when she had heard him out.

"Tell me something about her," said he.

"A most respectable, worthy young woman," said she.

"Dear lady!" said the poet, in gentle expostulation.

"Dear poet," said the lady; "she is all that. I am sorry if it disappoints you."

"But something more," pleaded the poet, smiling; "we are all respectable and worthy. Tell me. Her face is not of the type that one sees here?"

"She is not a native," said Lady Llandrindod. "She came here eight or nine years ago. She bought the little dressmaking business when old Miss Rowlands gave it up. Goodness me, the garments good Martha Rowlands made for her customers! Mary Redwing's advent to Maen Gorsedd meant a sort of small renaissance in the clothes of the village."

"Where did she come from?"

Lady Llandrindod shook her head. "Really," she said, "it never occurred to me before how little I knew of Mary Redwing! But, then," she added, after a pause, "I never saw all that you have seen in her eyes. For that, I suppose, one has to be a poet."

Peter Davidson, whom in my digression I left standing outside the open window of Mary Redwing's cottage, was not a poet. He was a well-to-do young farmer, who, for some months past, had been awaking to the knowledge that he was approaching his thirty-second year; that he was prosperous; that he was free to marry if he felt so inclined, and that Mary Redwing was the woman of all others who attracted

him. But at the moment, when he stood watching her through the casement and listening to her soft singing, something that was not unlike poetry possessed his soul. Where he was standing he could hear at the same time the round humming of the bees, the voice of Mary Redwing, and the sound of her iron, while from the forge, higher up the village street, came the ring of the blacksmith's hammer.

Mrs. Redwing, all unconscious of the presence of Davidson, continued to sing the same song. To meet the exigencies of the air, the last line had to be repeated twice, and as Peter Davidson heard the verse sung three times, he heard the last line six, and it rang afterwards in his head —

“That was not love that went.”

## CHAPTER II

MARY REDWING looked up and saw Peter. She blushed like a young girl. Her face was hot from her work, and, after the more fleeting colour had disappeared, a rosiness lingered under her eyes.

"That you, Mr. Davidson?" she said, going to the door. "I did n't hear you knock. I suppose I was too busy. Will you please to step in?"

Peter took off his hat and accepted the invitation.

"You was singin', Mrs. Redwing," he said, as if to add to the reasons why she should not have heard the knock which had never been given.

"I believe I was," said Mary Redwing. "Won't you sit down, Mr. Davidson?"

"Do I hinder you, Mrs. Redwing?"

"No ; I'm always glad to see you," said Mary.

"Won't you go on with your ironin', Mrs. Redwing?"

"Well, I'll do that," said Mary, "because I promised Mrs. Evans to get things done against she got back from market. I've got Johnny here while she's away ; and that's Mrs. Roberts's baby in the cradle."

Peter looked over in the direction she indicated and saw the sleeping child. A sound from the inner room told of the waking of Johnny, and Mary Redwing fetched him thence.

He played about on the floor, and presently David-



son took him up on his knee and amused him with a big silver watch and kept him quiet.

Mary Redwing then proceeded with her work. Peter looked on. He did not appear to have much to say. He had called once or twice lately and had sat on in the same desultory way. But at the back of his silence and behind his remarks about crops, grain and root, the weather, live stock and the like, just as the permanent humming of the bees lay behind all other sounds, his thoughts were turbulent.

His face expressed little of the agitation that was going on below the surface. It was a handsome face, with features of sufficient regularity. It had all the honest frankness of clear, unshifty eyes and of an inherited ignorance of the want of any of the things without which life is anxious. For generations prosperity had smiled upon the Davidsons of Maes Derwen. Peter owed his serenity to very different causes from those of the serenity of Mary Redwing.

Something in the manner of Davidson, however little the element of disturbance showed its presence, occasioned Mary some nervousness. She had been glad of the excuse to go on with her work. It was almost as if the linen and the iron afforded her protection. She made her task last as long as she could for reasons which were vaguely troubling, but which she did not care to face. At length, however, the last apron was ironed, the last handkerchief folded. She pinned the things up in a newspaper, and her work was done.

A longer silence had fallen. It held an indefinable suggestion of what might be. Mary sought hurriedly in her mind for a remark with which to break it. Johnny had slidden down from Peter's knee and was playing on the ground at his feet. The child had found a reel. He put it to roll down Peter's leg, which was outstretched. It fell off, almost at the first button of his gaiters, and Johnny crawled away towards it. The kitten sprang after it too. Mary saw these things, but, in her momentary dumbness, they offered her no help. Peter had ceased to regard the boy. Mary knew that he was looking at her.

A sound of voices outside broke the spell. Peter rose to his feet as the door opened to admit Peggy, who was followed by a young woman. The newcomer was Hannah, the daughter of John Rees, of the New Farm.

There was a moment's awkwardness.

"I'm afraid I'm disturbin' you, Mrs. Redwing," she said. "Peggy did n't tell me you had a visitor. Good afternoon, Mr. Davidson! We have n't seen you up at the New Farm lately. Father was wonderin'. Shall I call again, Mrs. Redwing?"

She was a girl with bold outlines. She could claim good looks, of a sort, and, so far as the present was concerned, her figure lost nothing of comeliness by a tendency to stoutness. Her eyes, big and dark, were showy rather than beautiful. She concealed a defect in the rim of one of her ears by means of her hair. Her teeth were fairly sound, but a trifle crowded.

Peggy put the paper parcel she was carrying down on the table.

"I hope there's nothing amiss with the dress," said Mary.

"Oh, nothing to signify. I tried it on before Peggy went, to see if it was all right. It does n't fasten quite straight and I thought you'd better see it on me."

She glanced at Peter, who had taken up his hat.

"I must be gettin' on," he said.

"Or else I could look in another time," said Miss Rees tentatively.

Her big eyes went from Davidson to the dress-maker. Peter looked annoyed. Mary began to unfasten the parcel.

"If you'll please to step into the next room, Miss Rees," she began.

Peter moved towards the door.

"Well, good-day, Mrs. Redwing," he said. "Good-day, Miss Hannah. Will you tell your father, please, that I shall come up to see him one day this week about the heifers? If I get the shorthorns as I'm biddin' for to-day at Borderhampton — or, rather, Mr. Evans is biddin' for me, for I have n't gone into market, as you see — I might be able to let your father —"

"I shan't remember all that," said Miss Rees. "I'll tell father we may, p'r'aps, hope to see you some day up at the New Farm — on business."

"On business," replied Davidson.

It was like accepting a challenge. He lifted the latch and went out.

Hannah Rees smiled oddly.

"'Fraid I frightened your visitor away, Mrs. Redwing," she said. "I'm sure I'm very sorry. I could 've come just as easily another time if I'd only known."

"It's the same to me, Miss Rees, whether you come now or any other time," said Mary quietly. She resented the apology and the manner of it. "I'm always ready to attend to my customers."

"And I daresay he often calls in as he passes?" said Miss Rees.

"If you'll take off your bodice —" said Mary Redwing, ignoring the last remark.

Miss Rees began leisurely to unhook the front of her dress. Mary fetched some pins from the paper which lay on the window-sill. She stuck a few for use into the bosom of her own gown, and then stood with the body of the new dress in her hands waiting to help her client on with it. Hannah Rees moved over towards the looking-glass and surveyed herself as she thrust her fat white arms into the sleeves of the garment Mrs. Redwing held for her. Mary pulled up the collar at the back and smoothed out the wrinkles, and then proceeded to fasten the buttons. She saw what was wrong at once.

"We'll soon put it right," she said.

She took some of the pins from her bosom and with them pinned the stuff together. In doing this, her face was brought very close to the face of Hannah. The two women were as nearly as possible of the same height, though Mary's slighter build allowed

her to look the taller. When she stooped, in adjusting the pins, Hannah Rees, standing bolt upright, looked down at her from over the little mounds of her own cheeks.

"You have n't a grey hair, Mrs. Redwing. How lucky you are to keep its colour like that. Father's wife" — Miss Rees was accustomed thus to designate her step-mother — "father's wife's hair's as black as ink, and she's forty-six; but she uses some stuff."

Mary raised her eyes quickly. There was no malice apparent in the tone of the speaker.

"It's not time for me to be grey," Mary said, smiling. She returned to her work, and, having put pins here and there for her guidance, she declared that she need trouble Miss Rees no further. "I'll send it round in the morning by Peggy. It won't take me half an hour. You could have it this evening if you like."

Miss Rees said that the morning would be soon enough.

"How thin your wedding-ring wears," she said abruptly.

The sunlight had flashed on it as Mary helped her to dress.

"Yes."

Mary looked down at her hand. Hannah held and stayed it for a moment.

"It can't have worn down in your time?" she said interrogatively.

"Peggy's nearly ten," said Mary.



She withdrew her hand gently but forcibly, and gave Miss Rees her brooch from a table where it had been put when it was taken off.

"But ten years — eleven years, would n't wear a ring down like that."

Mary Redwing was silent.

"Was it very thin when it was new?" asked Hannah.

"It was mother's wedding-ring," Mary answered.

A colour rose to her face as soon as she had spoken, and left it gradually.

"Your mother's?" said Miss Rees, with curiosity. "But did she take it off for you to be married in? Were n't you afraid of ill luck?"

Mary's face was troubled.

"She was dead," she said shortly.

"And you were married in the ring of a dead woman. Oh, I would n't have dared to let that happen. Didn't it frighten you when it was slipped on your finger? How was it? Did Mr. Redwing forget the ring, or what? I've heard of people being married with the top of a key."

"That was it," said Mary; "the ring was forgotten. I — had this one. I've worn it ever since. One is the same as another. Had you a shawl or anything, Miss Rees?"

"A day like this? No fear. Well, good afternoon, Mrs. Redwing. You'll send the dress in the morning, won't you?"

She was at the door now. Mary held it open for

her, and the humming of the bees sounded loudly. Hannah glanced once more at the thread of gold upon the dressmaker's finger.

"If it wears any thinner, you'll almost want another," she said, and then swung round on her heels and walked away.

### CHAPTER III

PETER DAVIDSON strode away from the cottage with a gait that expressed his impatience more definitely than did the frown to which his smooth forehead had lined itself.

In a more normal mood he would have stopped to exchange remarks with the two or three people to whom he nodded as he passed. John Jones, the blacksmith, looked out from the forge. Andrew, his son, always ready to idle, left the bellows and followed him to the door.

"Looks in a hurry, don't he?" Andrew laughed as if he had made a joke.

"I saw him go by some time ago," said his father. "I was hopin' he'd look in on his way back, whatever. I was want to know about them shoes."

"He ain't thinkin' o' no shoes," said Andrew, with a wink.

"Well, indeed, I don't know," said John.

"Except it's the shoes of a dead man he wants to step into, p'r'aps," said Andrew.

"Eh!" said his father. "What's that?"

Andrew hinted at his suspicions.

"Well, indeed!" said John Jones. The words in Maen Gorsedd seemed to have been framed to fit every case.

Meanwhile, Peter Davidson was passing the Cambrian Arms. Mrs. Pughs saw him from over the muslin blind that was stretched across the lower half of the window, behind the bar.

"There goes Mr. Davidson of Maes Derwen," said she. It was her business to gossip; it made the bar bright; it kept her customers in good temper. "He's oftener roundabout here than what he used to be. I wonder why he ain't at market? Whatever'll he do when his sister marries I don't know."

"An' that'll have to be soon, indeed, I'm told," said Abel Wynne, the wheelwright, taking his pipe slowly from between his lips, "if she don't want to lose Lloyd Morgan, however. They say he's beginnin' to fret at bein' kept waitin', and she don't like to leave her brother."

"He ought to marry himself," said Mrs. Pughs; "there's lots o' nice girls, I'm shu-er, as'd be glad enough to call themselves Mrs. Davidson of Maes Derwen, for the askin'. He's gettin' on for thirty if he ain't already. Why, Mr. Pughs was but twenty when he married me, and when he would have been thirty if he'd lived, I was a widow."

"Why don't you go in for him, Mrs. Pughs?"

"Don't you give me none o' your nonsense, Mr. Wynne," said the landlady, with twinkling eyes; "and pray what are you laffin' at, mister? I dessay I'm none too old to find another host for the Cambrian Arms neither. Annie, you giggling thing, wash up them glasses. No, you ain't to serve James Hum-

phrey with another drop. No, no, Mr. Humphrey, you fell asleep over your last."

James Humphrey extended his tankard in silence.

"He don't hear me," said Mrs. Pughs. "Tell 'im, one of you."

Wynne shouted Mrs. Pughs's edict into the old man's ear.

"Not any more?" he asked, in a clear, thin pipe.

The voice seemed to come from an immense distance. Yet distance must have been comparatively short in so small a body. He was shrivelled and meagre, but tough as nails. His age was unknown, but he was commonly believed to be well on in the nineties. His pate, under his white hat, was bald as an egg. The skin of his face and his hands was brownish and like leather, and was marked, here and there, with round patches of a lighter colour. But his eyes were bright and clear as those of a child.

"This once, missis," he said, extending his tankard again.

"Only half, then," said Mrs. Pughs. "Only half; he ain't to have more than half. He wants to drink like you young ones, an' I ought n't to serve 'im. But there, I always was soft-hearted."

The wheelwright took the pewter pot from her hand.

"An' before you touch it, grandfather," he said, loudly into the old man's ear, "you tell us whether it's any good Mrs. Pughs here settin' her cap at Peter Davidson o' Maes Derwen."

The old man glanced from Abel Wynne — to whom



he nodded in token that he understood — to the hostess of the Cambrian Arms.

“I’ve know Davidsons o’ Maes Derwen,” he said, in his far-off treble, that was yet very clear, “this eighty year an’ more. Peter Davidson and his father, and his father’s father, and I say this, missis, with all respect to you, an’ askin’ your pardon for makin’ bold to say it — ”

“It’s all Abel Wynne’s nonsense, James Humphrey,” Mrs. Pughs interrupted him to say. “Don’t you take no notice of his foolin’.”

“Askin’ your pardon,” continued the old man, waving his arm, and ignoring the interruption, if indeed he heard it, “there is n’t the woman born as was get a Davidson against his will if he was n’t set on it, nor the woman born whatever who could hold out against him if he was set upon her. No offence, I hope to you, missis. I only answer what I was asked. An’ here’s your very good health.”

While the affairs of Peter were being thus discussed, he was striding up Maen Gorsedd Lane. The blackberries were ripe or ripening in the hedges, where the nuts, too, were changing from a lighter to a darker hue. The hard road was rutted deeply, and in places the sun caught the polished metallic trace left by the shoe on the wheel of some heavy cart. He passed the cottage of Mrs. Owen, who had been the first to leave a child with Mary Redwing, and, remembering that she was her friend, he nodded cordially to her as he went by.

"Not in at market, Mr. Davidson?"

"Nor you?"

"Once a fortnight's often enough for me, indeed."

It struck Peter that conversation was elementary in the parish of Maen Gorsedd. He went his way. Near a mill known as Powell's, he left the lane and struck out across the fields towards his home.

In many a cornfield the reapers were at work. Here a machine cut down the golden stems, and bound them automatically into sheaves; there the sickle gleamed as a bronzed arm plied it. Peter's steps began to show less of impatience, and his brow cleared. What was the loss of one opportunity where so many had been allowed to slide? Maen Gorsedd was two miles from Maes Derwen, but at that it would stay. It would not run away, nor would Mary Redwing leave it. What though Hannah guessed the thing that was in his heart?

He stopped to watch the loading of a waggon. Two men stood ankle-deep in the gold and ranged the sheaves that were pitchforked up to them. The horses whisked their tails lazily, and turned their heads in slow remonstrance with the flies. A woman in a sun-bonnet, and a child or two, were gleaning in the stubble.

How sweet Mary had looked at her work. He liked to think of her with the spotless linen round her. It was like her own life, he knew. Then he began to wonder about her husband. Had she loved him, he wondered, — had she loved the man to whom the

first gift of herself in her beauty and her youth and her purity had been made? How he must have loved her, this other man! That was a thought which caused Peter Davidson a sudden pang of jealousy. He became conscious of an envy of the man who was dead. If Mary was young and comely now, albeit the mother of a child of nine or ten, what must she have been in the days when Redwing met her? Peter shut his eyes for a moment. He saw Mary slighter, perhaps, less placid, but not more fair. He could not picture her fairer. She was for him the one woman the world held, and it was but lately that he had found it out. He smiled as he remembered that there had been a day when his senses were stirred by a sight of the bold outlines of Hannah Rees and by a glance from her flashing eyes.

“Mary Redwing, Mary Redwing,” he said, below his breath, “I love you this day to my weal or woe. I love you as I have loved no other woman. All women, save you, from this day are as nothing to me, and I will win you, so help me God!”

He dropped on his knees at the place where he had been standing as he looked at the harvesters over the hedge. When he rose a moment later, he was at a loss to account for the impulse which had prompted his action; nor did he know clearly whether his prayer had taken any words. He felt, however, as one who has registered a vow.

He left the fields presently for the highroad, after following which for half a mile or so, he turned once

more into fields and took a path skirting a small plantation. He was on his own land now, and the richness of it gave him a sense of new pleasure as he looked about him. The county did not boast finer pasture than that of the acres of Maes Derwen. A stream bordered by willows ran through the meadow, and some cattle were standing in the shallow water. They looked up with sleepy eyes as Peter Davidson crossed the bridge of planks hard-by.

Clover Davidson, Peter's sister, met him at the door of the farmhouse. She was a tall young woman, with features bearing a strong resemblance to those of her brother. Her eyes, however, did not match each other in colour ; and this, while it was far from unattractive in its effect, lent a curious expression to her face. Twenty-five years back there had been consternation at Maes Derwen, when the defect (as it was held) was perceived in the eyes of the newborn child. Superstition was then more general and more potent than it is now, and the gravest anxiety prevailed in the minds of the parents as to what this freak might portend. The difference was clearly visible, even on the day of birth, and instead of disappearing, as at first was hoped, it became more and more definitely marked till, by the time Clover was three or four years old, it was plain that she was to be singled out from the daughters of men by having one eye of brown and the other of light grey. Each was beautiful in itself. Together they were strange, perverse, enticing. It had been looked in the early days that

the child would exhibit some twist of mind or fantastic propensity, if not, indeed, signs of supernatural possession. The midwife had opined that the child would have second sight. The brown eye, she said, — it was golden brown, like that of a pheasant, — was the gift of the sun, and the pale eye, the gift of the moon. With the one would she see that which all might see ; with the other the things that are hidden. But the years came and went, and Clover Davidson was as other children, and the mother, who had begun by holding the child in awe, as a thing foreign, sportive, uncanny, ended by taking it to her heart as her own. Before the death of the parents, they had agreed that the girl was so equally the representative of them both that even her eyes had been presented to her one by each of themselves, so that, to avoid the favouring of either, the brown eye had been given her by her brown-eyed father, the grey eye by her grey-eyed mother. At twenty-five, Clover Davidson was rather proud than otherwise of her distinction. She was even at pains to accentuate the peculiarity by adopting brown and grey as her colours, and lately she had pointed it further still by getting a sheep-dog whose eyes, as is not unusual in his breed, were diverse in hue as her own.

The dog was at her feet now, and bounded towards Peter as he came up the garden path. Clover, too, advanced to meet him.

"Tea's all ready," she said. "I was only waitin' till you came in."



"Well, here I am," said Peter.

He put his hand on his sister's arm, and the two went into the house. Clover was absent in her manner. She seemed to be turning something over in her mind, and now and then she glanced at her brother with her curious eyes. It was perhaps the strangeness of the effect of their colours that made it impossible for her to look at you often without your knowledge. Peter, as he demolished the toast that she had made for him, became conscious of a recurring flash as of light in his direction.

"What is it, Clover?"

She started, and put down her cup.

"You've something to tell me. What is it?"

"Well, I don't know," said Clover, and stopped.

The dog sat watching each morsel Peter put into his mouth.

"I daresay I can guess," said Peter, smiling. "I suppose Lloyd Morgan will have been here?"

"Yes, he's been here this afternoon; but it isn't that."

"What is it, then? Clover, you treat him shamefully, and all on account of me. But I won't have it, my girl. He wants to marry you now, I know; and he's waited two years, and you cannot expect more of any man. If he's set on a date, my dear, you must just give way. There's Cousin Martha Vaughan offered to come an' keep house for me when you go. It will be a pretty thing to have go round the country as you can't marry because of leavin' me. I shall get on all right, you'll see."

He paused, and smiled.

“An’ perhaps I might think of marryin’, myself,” he added.

Clover looked at him quickly.

“Not — not Hannah Rees?” she said.

“No, not Hannah Rees,” said Peter; “an’ don’t you jump to conclusions. I only said ‘perhaps’!”

## CHAPTER IV

"BUT it was n't about Lloyd Morgan," said Clover, after a pause.

A wasp had flown into the room, and was buzzing now in one of the small panes of the window. She watched it absently, wondering vaguely when it would chance to fly downwards to the aperture at which it had come in. Every now and then it crawled up the glass for a little while, working its tail incessantly, and then took to its wings as before.

Peter looked over at her. He had finished his tea, and was leisurely filling his pipe.

"It's Jenny Brecon," she said abruptly.

Peter put his tobacco-bowl back on its shelf.

"What about her?"

"She — It's dead — her baby's dead."

"That's for the best," said Peter shortly.

"Yes, that's for the best, p'r'aps," said Clover.

There was another pause. The wasp, by accident, found its exit. The ceasing of its buzzing seemed to make a silence in the farm-kitchen. The dog took a walk round, yawned, stretched himself, and lay down. A cow lowed in the lane on its way to the milking. The sound called up before the eyes of Clover the sight of a girl on a milking-stool, her face close against a red flank, while at her deft manipulation the white liquid poured rapidly into the frothing pail.

"Well?" said Peter.

He struck a match, and proceeded to light his pipe.

"The baby's dead," Clover said again. "It only lived a week. It was n't strong."

Peter was silent — waiting.

"Jenny Brecon's here," said his sister.

"Here?"

"Well, in the laundry. There was no one workin' there, so I told her to sit and wait till you came in."

"What does she want? I wonder she was n't ashamed to show her face here."

Clover went over to where her brother was standing. The sunlight from the window shone into her strange eyes, and Peter, without being conscious of receiving any impression, noted how clear they were and steadfast.

"Will you take her back to work?"

"Did she come here to ask that?"

Clover nodded.

"I can answer that pretty straight, indeed," said Davidson. "It does n't take much thinkin'. I'm surprised you let her wait, Clover. You must have known very well what my answer would be."

"You won't let her stop?"

"No," said Peter; "I certainly will not. Are n't there plenty of decent girls who know how to behave themselves, that I should take back one who brought disgrace upon herself? I think worse of her for comin' to ask."

"Where else was she to go?" said Clover. "She'd

been here five years. We'd never any fault to find with her till this happened. What was she to do?"

"She should have thought of what she was to do sooner."

"I don't like to hear you speak so," said Clover.

Peter's words seemed to separate him from her. She was vaguely alarmed. She wanted to plead for the unhappy girl who sat waiting in the outhouse, but Peter's manner held her off.

After a pause, he moved across the room towards the door.

"Ah," said Clover, "where are you goin'?"

"To speak to her," he said, standing still.

"What are you going to say?"

"I'm goin' to tell her she can't stop."

"Let her work with the dairy hands," said Clover. "Jane Marton's settled in, I know, in her place. I don't want her to be made to give it up. Let Jenny live at home, like Polly, an' come up an' work with the others. Peter, give her another chance. Think, she's young; she's got a long life before her, in which she can prove to you that there's good left in her. What's to become of her if you turn her off? Think, Peter, think — if it was me."

Peter looked at her gravely.

"It could n't be you," he said, "or any decent woman."

There was another pause. Clover made no answer. Her face wore a strange expression. Peter went to the door. There he stopped again.



"I'd have done it for you, if I could, Clover."

"I'm sorry you will not."

"I'm sorry I cannot."

"Cannot, Peter?"

"Will not, then, because it would not be right."

"You are hard."

"God gave the law."

"And John Watkin goes off to the next county and marries and settles down."

"The bad behaviour of John Watkin does n't make Jenny's sin any the less. I — well, I can't forgive a woman. That's all about it, Clover. When a woman forgets to respect herself, I can't respect her. Jenny Brecon was a bad girl — well as she did her work — or she would not find herself in the case she is in now."

"Mother used to tell," said Clover slowly, "that old Gwellian said, when I was born, that I should have the gift of prophecy. I've never felt anything like what I'm feeling now. Something tells me, Peter, that you'll live to forgive a woman yet."

There were tears in her eyes as she turned away. The dog jumped up, and would have followed her as she left the room, but she closed the door quickly behind her without seeing him. A sudden weakness came over her. She went up to her bedroom, and, sitting down on a chair beside the bed, she hid her face in the patchwork counterpane. Her heart ached for the pale-faced girl who sat waiting Peter's verdict in the laundry. She had known the futility of interced-

ing with him on Jenny's behalf when she undertook the office. Peter had stern views of right and wrong. A strain of puritanism ran through the Davidson stock. This, in itself, would have been hard enough to combat, but, in addition to it, Clover, whose love for her brother did not blind her to his faults, thought she detected a personal note in his denunciation of the Magdalen. The offence of Jenny had been attended by some scandal on the farm. She heard the door close presently, and knew that he was on his way to the outhouse. She rose and went to her window, whence she got an oblique view of the yard. From behind the white curtains, she saw Peter cross the cobblestones with which it was paved, and enter the laundry with a firm step. The dog was with him and followed him in.

It seemed to Clover a long time before the door opened and he came out. So far as she could see, at the distance, his face, usually so kindly, still wore a look of sternness. He went up the lane at the back of the farm, and Clover knew that, having given Jenny her answer, he was going about his work in the ordinary course. She saw him go up towards the corn-field, where his men were busy with harvest. The dog looked after him, hesitated, and went back into the laundry.

Not till supper did the brother and sister meet that night. Then an unusual silence reigned between them. A restraint expressed itself, even when they spoke. The cosy room, with its crossbeams and its black oak

cupboards and shelves, its shining metals and its polished floor, took to itself an unfamiliar aspect. Clover rose and stirred the fire. The August night had grown chilly, she thought. Peter asked where Rover was. It was his absence, he thought, that gave the sense of something lacking.

"He's off huntin', p'r'aps," said Clover. "He'll be roundabout somewhere. He never goes very far."

She tried to give her voice a cordial ring, but the recollection of whose company the dog had been seeking when last she saw him, and of a little theory of her own, which attributed his return to the laundry to an animal's instinct of pity, recalled to her the hardness of Peter, and the attempt was not very successful.

"I got those shorthorns," said Peter, when the supper was over.

"I know," answered his sister. "I saw Will Griffiths on his way from takin' you the message."

"You knew I was hopin' to get them," said Peter.

"Where are they now?" asked Clover.

Peter did not answer.

"Hark!" said his sister suddenly.

She paused on her way across the kitchen with some unused plates for the dresser. There was a patter of rain on the leaves.

"The clouds was comin' up this evenin'," said Peter. "It's goin' to be a wet night. I'm glad I got that last load in. I was half a mind to take the men off it and leave it till to-morrow."

"I thought I heard Rover," said his sister. She was still standing in an attitude of listening. "There again! What was that?"

She put the plates on the table and went to the door. The rain splashed down on the threshold. The night was full of the sound of the water. The light from the lamp illuminated the nearer drops. They fell in close, even lines. In the distance a dog was barking.

"Listen! I'm sure it's Rover. I wonder where he is? Seems to come from over there."

She pointed out into the darkness as she spoke. Peter had followed her to the door.

"Here, Rover, Rover, Rover!" she cried, and pursed up her lips and whistled shrilly.

"He can't be caught in a trap?" she said questioningly.

"No; he's in the green meadow. There's no traps there, and he would n't bark like that if he was hurt. Rover! Rover!"

The girl whistled again. It was a clear, sharp note, and seemed to pierce the hiss of the falling rain. For a space then, save the noise of the heavy shower, there was silence; then a sound of the brushing aside of leaves and shrubs as something swept through them. Rover appeared in the patch of light thrown out on to the garden path.

"Where have you been?" said Clover. "Where have you been in all the wet? Shake yourself, and come through to the scullery."

But the dog made no attempt to obey.

"Here, come on!" said Davidson.

"What's the matter with him?" said Clover.

The dog had run a few yards into the garden, and out of the light. His pale eye gleamed in the darkness.

"Like the eyes of a cat," thought his mistress. "I suppose mine's like that, too, in the dark."

He came forward, and then ran back, and then he barked as he had barked in the distance.

"There's something wrong," said Clover, in a curious voice; "there's something wrong in the green meadow. He wants us to come with him. Look at him! He's off again. Here, Rover!"

"I'll go down," said Davidson. "Keep him here till I get my coat."

Clover coaxed the dog to come to her, and then held him by his wet ruff. His shaggy coat was sleek with water, and he seemed reduced to half his size. He was excited, and he struggled to free himself, but his mistress held him firmly with both hands.

Peter appeared, wearing a mackintosh down to his ankles. Clover released the dog, who bounded away barking. Then she stood at the open door, listening to the retreating steps of her brother. They died away in the distance, and there was only the sound of the rain. How it fell! It splashed up at a rebound where it struck the flat stone before the threshold. The pipe from the gutters of the roof emptied itself with a jerky pouring into the soft-water butt that stood at the corner of the house. The gar-



den gave forth the sweet smell of wet earth. But how the flowers would be battered, thought Clover — the sweet-peas and the hollyhocks and the dahlias! She peered out to try and gauge the damage of the shower. How dark it was beyond the patch of light! How dark it must be in the green meadow! In the distance, she heard once more the bark of Rover. What was passing down there? she wondered. She strained her ears for sounds, but the rain seemed to drown all but its own. Peter ought to have taken a lantern. He must be at the spot now whence Rover's bark had first sounded. Perhaps he was looking about there for whatever it might be that had occasioned it. But what use to look in such darkness? Assuredly he must want a lantern. She would take one down to him.

She hurried into the house, and found a great-coat that had been her father's. It enveloped her form from head to foot. She slipped on a pair of overshoes that she wore sometimes about the farm in the winter, and with these, and an oilskin hat of Peter's, she felt herself equipped for any storm. She lit the lantern and went out.

The rain beat down upon her, pattering loudly on the smooth surface of the hat. Puddles had formed themselves already in the garden. She splashed through them. The flickering light of the lantern glistened on wet leaves. A little rivulet of water ran from a hollow groove in the top of the gate as she opened it. She entered the paddock and made her way along the footpath to the stile which led into the

first meadow. That known as the green meadow was below this, and on the other side of the stream which Peter had crossed on his way from Maen Gorsedd. She held the lantern high above her head as she neared the plank bridge.

"Peter!"

There was no answer. The darkness seemed to hem her into the little circle of light.

"Peter!" she called again, more loudly.

"Hallo!"

His voice came from her right. She followed the stream in the direction of it. She came upon him sooner than she expected.

"Oh, you've brought a light," he said. "I'm very glad. There is something in the water here. I can't tell what it is. I thought first it might be a sheep; but there have n't been any sheep in the meadow this last week, an' I don't know how it could 'a' got here. Let's have the lantern."

He took it from her hand. Clover felt the wet darkness close round her.

"It's in this pool here," her brother went on. "If anything got in it, it'd never get out. It's seven or eight feet deep under this tree."

He put his arm round the trunk of the willow and leant forward, holding the lantern close above the surface of the water. Rover peered over the brink and made a whistling sound with his nostrils.

"Can you see anything?" said Clover. Her teeth began to chatter.

Davidson did not answer, and she waited. From where she stood, she could see rings made by the rain on the further side of the stream. Peter, who was groping in the water, suddenly turned partly round.

"Take the lantern," he said shortly. She obeyed mechanically. "Stand forward a bit, and hold it low; a little more to the left, lower — so."

He laid himself flat on his belly on the bank, and, still clasping the trunk of the tree with one arm, he reached down into the water with the other. Incidentally, Clover thought how long and big he looked on the ground. She saw him grasp something in the dark water. She began to tremble. The light flickered. She knew that which was horrible was about to be revealed. Already Peter's hand must know the nature of the thing it held. She thought, inconsequently, of the warm, cosy kitchen, where the lamp-light shone on many polished surfaces. An animal fear possessed her. She had an inkling of the sensations that lead to the blind panic of runaway horses. It was with difficulty that she resisted the impulse to dash down the lantern she held and take to flight. But she stood still, and watched Peter drag up the limp, dripping mass of black, with its three white patches. It seemed lead-heavy.

## CHAPTER V

MARY REDWING'S face was troubled as she went into the room after the departure of Hannah Rees. Its normal serenity had given place to a look of anxious thought. The poet, could he have seen her then, would have been strengthened in his theory that her calmness had followed that which was not calm. Out of such a look of apprehension, after a time in which the fears that gave rise to it met with no realization, might well have come the settled peace which had so deeply impressed him.

Mary stood for some moments at the hearth with her finger to her lip and her forehead contracted in thought. She did not see the fire which, warm as the day was, it had been necessary to make up for her ironing and on which her eyes were resting. Her mental vision was paramount just then. Her thoughts were turned inwards. She saw scenes and people that had little connection with those of her present life. The frown deepened on her brow, and tears came slowly into her eyes, and stayed there till she wiped them away absently with the corner of her apron. Gradually the mood, whatever its nature or its occasion, passed off, and her face assumed its usual tranquillity.

Mrs. Roberts's baby had been fretful for the last quarter of an hour, and Peggy was nursing it on her knee in the garden. Mary glanced at the clock. She

had been intending to take the children out for a turn when she had finished her work. It was four o'clock. She determined to have tea first, and then go out with them. Accordingly she set about getting it ready. She was glad of the occupation. It gave her time more completely to recover herself. When presently she called them in, she was even cheerful, and responded with interest to the prattle of Johnny, and listened to Peggy's account of the incidents of her walk ; of how Mr. Rees had been sitting on one chair, with his gouty foot on another, and how Mrs. Rees had given her an apple, and Hannah Rees had n't said please, when she told her to carry the parcel.

"I don't like Miss Rees," she said stoutly.

Mary reproved her for making so definite an avowal. But she smiled, and Peggy added, "I don't think you do either."

"We must n't dislike anybody," said Mary.

Her own words set her thinking. She had uttered them with a good mother's instinctive inclination to instil a moral precept into her child, when and where the opportunity for it occurs.

"Why should n't I dislike Hannah Rees?" she asked herself immediately. She found no more satisfactory answer to her question than that we are told to love our enemies. This first put into words an idea that had not then taken definite shape in her mind. Hannah Rees was an enemy, then?

It was equally her duty, however, to teach her



little daughter politeness, so Mary did not resist the temptation of agreeing with Peggy that it was not good manners on the part of Miss Rees to have told her to carry the parcel without saying "please."

"Now, you get your hat, and give Johnny his, and we'll go out for a walk," said Mary cheerily.

She had never allowed Peggy to be burdened with any cares which might have been apportioned to herself. It was her constant effort to make the child's life as bright and happy as possible. She put on her bonnet, and, having dressed the baby, took it up in her arms, bade Peggy take Johnny by the hand, turned the key in the cottage door, and went out into the village street with the children. Every one had a nod and a word for her as she went by.

"We must go towards the town," she said to Peggy, "so as not to miss Mrs. Roberts and Mrs. Evans, if they're on their way back."

Now and then a market-cart passed, crammed to its utmost limit with returning country-folk, or holding a couple of calves or a pig or two under coarse netting at the back. Or dusty cattle met them on the road, or a farmer riding, or a woman with empty baskets. The carriage from the Castle came along. Lady Llandrindod nodded and smiled as Mary bowed respectfully and Peggy curtsied.

"That's the young woman Philip Hetherington went into such raptures over," said Lady Llandrindod to the friend who was driving with her. "He thought her face so remarkable. I told you he saw her one

day in the village when he was staying with me, and he was quite disappointed because I had n't a history to tell of her."

"Pretty woman—very," said Lady Llandrindod's friend. "Yes; I remember you told me. Poets and painters, and all that sort of people, always want women to have pasts—don't they? The worst of it is that the deficiency can generally be supplied. Any woman who is pretty in the present can have a past in the future."

"That sounds clever," said Lady Llandrindod. "I suppose because it holds something rather wicked. Mary Redwing is a good woman."

"Dear me, yes," said her friend. "Was n't that what our poet regretted?"

Lady Llandrindod chuckled. The carriage rolled on towards Maen Gorsedd, and the talk to other matters.

Mary strolled along the road, unconscious that she had been the subject of discussion between the great ladies from the Castle. She watched Peggy and Johnny, who were playing in front of her. The hedges were green, and the oaks and elms bore as yet no sign of the autumn that was at hand. Birds were singing from every tree. The sun gilded the landscape, but already there were coming up the clouds that were to discharge themselves in rain a few hours later. Mary became aware of a sense in the atmosphere of impending change. Insensibly she reverted to the thoughts that had troubled her. Was any change looming in her own life?

It was as if there lurked in the simple events of the day some unknown threat. Yet what had happened to assail the serenity in which she had dwelt for eight peaceful years? What had she to fear? She looked down at the slender band of gold upon her finger. Hannah Rees's last words rang in her ears: "If it wears any thinner, you'll almost want another." She said them over to herself, wondering whether any hidden intention lay in them. She could not think of them as chance words lightly spoken. One significance at least they bore.

Then she thought of Peter Davidson. She shrank from facing the issues of that which she had read in his manner. She wished to think that she had been mistaken, and tried to put from her the thought of those few moments of tense silence when her tongue had been paralyzed. The entrance of Hannah and Peggy had only postponed, for a time, a thing that was surely coming. Had she not seen it coming? The visits of Peter Davidson to the cottage had had but one meaning, and she had blinded herself to it wilfully. In the monotony of her life they had been very sweet. It was good to hear the sound of his voice, and to see his face with its open and somewhat grave expression. It could look stern, she fancied, though she had never seen it so. She covered her eyes with her hand for a moment at the thought.

Peggy saw the action, and, believing that her mother was crying, ran back to her.

"Crying?" said Mary. "No, dear. What have I

to cry for when I have a little daughter who loves me so much?"

She kissed the child and reassured her, and the words seemed to bring a degree of comfort to herself. But circumstances on this day appeared to have conspired to turn her thoughts to that which made the ground tremble under her feet.

There came, very slowly, along the road, a donkey-cart, driven by an old woman who bent forward every now and then to urge the animal on. The reins she held were of thin rope and the rest of the harness was of the poorest description. The cart held, besides herself, a chest of drawers of ancient pattern. As she neared Mary, she looked in another direction, and would have passed by without a word had not Mary stepped out into the road.

"Good-day, Mrs. Brecon," she said in her kind and gentle voice. "I thought it was you, as you came along. You've been into town to-day?"

"Yes," the old woman answered shortly.

"I hope Jenny's better."

"She's better, thank you."

She made as if she would proceed on her way. Under her dingy hooped bonnet, her wrinkled face looked grim and unresponsive.

"I shall be having a lot of work in this week," Mary said, ignoring a rebuff, if any were intended. "Mrs. Pughs is sending me in some new linen to hem, and I was wondering if Jenny would p'r'aps like to come down and help me with it."

Mrs. Brecon looked at her searchingly; and then her lined and withered face puckered and she burst into tears. The reins fell from her fingers, and her knuckles went to her eyes.

"She wasn't all to blame," she said, sobbing; "an' she was ill enough when it was born to wipe out any sin. I say that, so as God can hear me. My Jenny, my boy's child! An' nobody's come near her; an' in town to-day I saw them whispering when they saw me. I'd tuk this chest o' drawers in to sell her, because Jenny's illness, an' her wages stoppin' an' all, it was hard to get along. But when I did see them waggin' their tongues, I turned about an' come back. Indeed, I wish we were both dead."

"Hush," said Mary soothingly; "hush! I wish I'd been up to see you and Jenny before this. I've thought of her all the time and I'd meant to go. I don't condemn her—indeed I don't. Who am I that I should? Oh, Mrs. Brecon, it's only women know what women have to bear."

Her own tears were flowing now. Peggy and Johnny had run on ahead, and were jumping on and off a heap of stones.

"You heard it died?" said the old woman, after a pause.

"Yes, I heard that. Did she feel it much, poor Jenny?"

"I don't know, indeed," said the grandmother. "She was take little notice of anything then. She seemed to lost all care. It was a nice little thing; I



could 'a' loved it. But it's best dead. They're best dead when they're like that."

"Oh, no!" cried Mary. "No; don't say that. It might have lived to be good and happy. The sins of the parents are n't visited on the children always — at least, not so. This is a dark time for you, Mrs. Brecon; but things will get better — you'll see. People will forget. The cloud will blow over, and for the present don't heed cruel tongues. They don't mean half they say. Now, will Jenny come to me on Wednesday? I know she's not strong, and I won't give her too much to do. And she must let me advance her a bit of the money —"

Mary felt for her purse.

"God bless you, Mrs. Redwing!" the old woman said. "You're one of God's good women."

"No," said Mary hurriedly.

"I don't know how to thank you, indeed," said Mrs. Brecon brokenly; "but I mustn't take the money, for I don't know yet whether Jenny will be able to do the work. She was goin' up to-day to Maes Derwen, to see if Mr. Davidson would give her another chance."

"Oh," said Mary, "that would be better far. I hope he will. But you must take the money. It can be a loan, and you can pay me again any time. Oh, I hope Mr. Davidson will take Jenny back. He is a good man; I am sure he will."

"He is a good man," echoed Mrs. Brecon; but she shook her head.

## CHAPTER VI

CLOVER, in the days that followed, lived many times through the terrible moment in which she and her brother looked each into the eyes of the other, across the swollen and dripping mass that had once been Jenny. A horrible desultoriness of several seconds' duration ensued, when, in the splashing rain, they stood on the bank, uncertain what to do first.

The girl was manifestly dead. After a futile attempt to restore animation, Peter lifted her up in his arms. The subsequent events of the night were not less distinct to Clover in retrospect. Dominant in her impressions was the sight of Peter carrying his burden through the darkness and the rain. Crossing the stile was like a bit of a horrible dream. How heavy that which had been Jenny Brecon seemed to be! A bit of the wet dress caught on a nail and tore and Clover darted forward to release it. In doing so, she touched one of the lifeless hands. She remembered that. She shrank back from it, and then she thought, if a merely momentary contact with the cold flesh was repellent, how tenfold terrible must be the clasping of the whole corpse! Yet Peter made no sign of his revulsion. He strode on in silence.

Oh, death was strange! In life Jenny was a thing you liked to touch. To the attractiveness of her dainty body she owed the passion of John Watkin, the lover

who rode away. The dairy work had done little to spoil the smooth skin, and her laughing face, with the complexion of milk and roses, and the red lips that, when they parted, showed such white, white teeth, were things you wanted to kiss. Poor Jenny! And this was Jenny, too, this heavy, fearful thing, from which the soul must turn in sickness! Oh, death was strange!

Peter stopped at the garden gate.

"Get me a sheet," he said, in a husky voice.  
"I'm going to put her in the laundry."

"I'd better light you there."

Clover remembered the curious sensation of hearing her own words spoken in a whisper, for she had not been conscious of any wish to lower her voice.

She went on before him to the door of the place where, a few hours earlier, Jenny had sat waiting. She opened it and went in, and moved a few things hastily from the wide ironing-board (it was half shelf, half table) that ran the length of one of the walls. On this Peter deposited his burden.

"It's no good getting brandy?"

"No good," said Peter. "Bring me a sheet and a pillow. I don't like to see her head on the boards."

Clover left him, and presently returned with the things he had asked for. Between them they laid the body out temporarily, and covered it with the sheet. Peter locked the door, and put the key in his pocket.

"I must ride into Borderhampton."

"To-night?"

"Yes."

"What about Mrs. Brecon?"

"I'll go there too."

"I'll go there," said Clover.

"You look like a ghost."

"No matter. I'll go; it'll be better for a woman to tell her. And it'll be something to do while you're gone."

"I'll take the cart, then, and drop you at the four roads."

Clover hurried into the house, and changed the oilskin hat for a hood of her own. Otherwise she did not make any alteration in the things she was wearing. The kettle was on the hob, and she mixed for her brother a strongish glass of whiskey and water. The hot glass warmed her cold hands as she took it out to the stable.

"Have you had any yourself?" he said, before taking it from her.

"No."

"Drink some, then."

"I have n't made more than enough for you."

"Do as I tell you," he answered.

She took a few sips, and gave him the glass, which he emptied. He had lit the lamps of the cart, and they threw their light on to the wet yard. He led the horse out of the stable. The shoes of the animal clattered on the cobblestones. A few minutes later, the horse and cart turned out of the lane on to the high-road. The rain now showed signs of abating. The

horse splashed through the mud at a brisk trot, and the lights danced along the hedges.

"Are you very wet, Clover?"

"No, indeed. Father's old coat's kept me almost dry."

There was silence.

"This is a sad night's work," said Davidson then.

Clover nodded. She could not find a voice in which to speak.

They neared the four roads at which she was to alight. The sign-post stood up with gaunt arms pointing. In his preoccupation, Peter would have passed it, but Clover stayed him. She got out of the cart in silence, and a little stiffly. Her long coat impeded her movements. She was about to walk away, when a thought struck her and she turned round.

"Hadn't I better have the key?" she asked. "Mrs. Brecon may want to come up to Maes Derwen. Indeed, I think I'll bring her up anyway. I can't leave her alone."

"Woa, boy, steady," said Peter to the horse.

He fumbled in his pocket, and produced the key.

"Yes, take her up to the house, and let her stay with you. I wouldn't show her the—the—I wouldn't show her Jenny unless she's set on it."

"It would be better not," said Clover. "I hope she won't ask. Shall you be back to-night?"

"I expect so."

There was a pause, but he did not move.

"Clover."



"Yes, Peter."

"God knows I'm sorry."

He put out his hand. She caught it, and held it to her lips. She was sobbing when he drove off, and his own eyes held tears.

Of the scene in Mrs. Brecon's cottage, Clover could only think afterwards with pain unspeakable. Jenny had been the idol of her grandmother's heart, and her fall had done nothing to diminish the old woman's love for her. Her grief now was terrible to witness. She had reached the age when such happiness as remained to her was made up of the things that she had. Nothing new could come into her life to give it joy. She had outlived her prosperity as she had outlived her only son. Jenny, his daughter, was to her the sum of all that made her latter days endurable. In losing her she lost everything, and there was left for her only the black days of waiting till her own summons should sound.

She was standing at the cottage door when Clover came up, and Clover knew instinctively that she was looking out for one who would never return to her.

"Oh, it is n't Jenny," she said, with disappointment, as she saw that the girl who advanced was not her grand-daughter.

Clover heard the words with a tightening of the muscles at her heart.

"No, it's not Jenny," she said, and Mrs. Brecon recognized her as she came into the light.

"Miss Davidson!" the old woman said doubtfully.

Then, as she saw her face more clearly, she grasped her hands and drew her into the cottage, "Where's my Jenny?" she said breathlessly. "Where's my Jenny? What have you done with her? There's tears on your face, Miss Davidson. She went up to-day to see if you and Mr. Davidson would take her back in the dairy, and she has not come home. I've stood at the door all the evening waiting. Where is she, I say? Where is she?"

Clover struggled for calmness, and broke the tidings she bore. Afterwards she remembered many unimportant things. The paraffin-lamp that stood upon the table was smoking, and a little trail of soot had formed itself upon one side of the glass chimney. She remembered that a supper of bread and cheese lay untouched upon the table where the lamp was standing, and that an old-fashioned chest of drawers which was near the door, as if it had been moved out of its place, was very much in the way. All this she noted unconsciously before Mrs. Brecon sank to her knees and buried her face in the patchwork cushion of a chair. The cry she had given was that of something which has received its death-blow.

Clover knelt beside her, but she refused to be comforted.

"You've killed her between you," she said. "Yet, no, I don't blame you. You was n't hard to her. You come to see her when she was ill — but your brother! It was him refused to take her back, I know that well enough. You may make excuses for him, and try to

shield him, but oh, I know, I know. Well, she's dead now, my poor Jenny, and perhaps he'll be satisfied. My little Jenny, my Willy's child! And I'm left to live on. Oh, it was hard of him, Miss Davidson, hard of him!"

She rocked herself to and fro on the ground, and beat with her thin hands upon her forehead and her breast. For an hour or more, Clover tried to comfort her, and then Mrs. Brecon said she would go and see Jenny. Clover hoped to divert her from her purpose, but encouraged the old woman to accompany her to Maes Derwen. The rain had ceased by this time, and the moon had struggled out from behind the clouds. The world smelled fresh and sweet.

"Will you take my arm?" Clover said gently; but Mrs. Brecon shook her head.

"I've got to learn to live alone," she said, "to look to none for help, and it's best I should begin at once."

Clover was silent then. They had walked for about a quarter of a mile when Mrs. Brecon began to talk to herself. A word here and there in her mutterings was audible to Clover, who looked at her with alarm. The old woman seemed to be occupied with the past. It was her son's life and her son's death round which her thoughts appeared to be playing.

"You don't remember Will, whatever?" she said, addressing Clover suddenly.

"No," said Clover.

"He'd have left Gorsedd before your time. He

was gardener to Mr. Llewellyn, over Merioneth way. He'd a cottage of his own, with green shutters and roses on the wall, and Jane Pritchard made him a good wife, for all I was against the match indeed. 'And mother,' he was used to say, 'there'll always be a home for you here when you make up your mind to leave th' old place'; and in one week him and Jane struck down with bad throats — diphtery, the doctor said it was — an' I saw them lie dead on their beds, and I brought the child home here. That was Jenny. You know Jenny; she work for Mr. Davidson, over at Maes Derwen?"

Clover knew not whether to be thankful or the more grieved at this manifestation of the result of the shock. She wondered whether Mrs. Brecon would remember the object of her visit. Apparently she did not. When they had reached the farmhouse, she allowed Clover to instal her in an armchair by the fire, and for a time she asked no questions.

It was close on midnight then. Clover mixed for her a glass of brandy and water, after drinking which the old woman began to doze. A time of waiting followed. It seemed a long while before the distant sound of wheels broke the stillness that had succeeded the rain. As it came nearer, it was as if the old woman became conscious of it in her slumbers. She stirred uneasily. Clover hurried out to the yard to meet her brother. He was alone.

"They're comin' on presently," he said. "You'd better go to bed, Clover. I'll sit up."

He unharnessed the horse. Clover stayed with him while he pushed the cart back into the shed and rubbed the animal down.

"Mrs. Brecon's here," she said, as he shut the stable door behind him.

"How did she take it?"

"It was dreadful at first. Now it's stunned her. She seems to be dotin'. She came up to see Jenny, but I think she's forgotten. She's asleep now."

"She must stay here to-night. To-morrow we'll see what can be done."

He followed his sister into the house. Clover saw that Mrs. Brecon was not where she had left her. The chair stood empty by the hearth, and the old woman was standing in the middle of the kitchen, as if waiting for some one. Clover looked at her in apprehension. Sleep seemed to have cleared her brain.

"It's you, Peter Davidson, is it?" she said, in a trembling voice. "You as drove my Jenny to her death—Jenny, the gentlest and best creature that ever was led astray from the paths of right. You refused her another chance. It's such men as you as drive poor girls to the towns. I'm an old woman, and they do say there's weight in words spoken from the edge of the grave. Ah, I don't want to curse you, but hark to this: may God, who says 'Vengeance is Mine,' deal with you. May sufferin' come to you through the sin of a woman, till your hard heart be softened, and you can learn to forgive."

A short cry escaped Clover's lips as the old woman



spoke. The words were so close in their likeness to those she herself had uttered earlier in the day. She did not look at her brother, but she was conscious that he did not move a muscle of his face, even as he listened in silence.

Then Mrs. Brecon seemed to relapse into her former state. She suffered Clover to lead her from the room and put her to bed. Clover returned to the kitchen.

"They'll want somethin' to drink when they come," Peter said. "I don't know whether they'll move the body to-night or not."

Clover put some glasses on the table and filled up the kettle. There seemed to be nothing else that she could do, so she kissed her brother and went upstairs. She had given Mrs. Brecon her own room, and she made up a bed for herself in one of the attics.

One place would do as well as another to lie awake in.

## CHAPTER VII

"AND this, you see," said Lady Llandrindod, when she had read aloud from the local paper the account of the inquest upon the body of Jenny Brecon — "this, you see, is the light in which our honest yeoman regards what our poet would have said made the young woman interesting. He refused to take her back. Dear, dear!"

"She is not the first woman," said Lady Llandrindod's friend, "who owes her death indirectly to the pigheadedness of a good man. I have no doubt Mr. — Mr. — Davidson, is it? — is a good man. They always are good — these people who judge. The poor girl, of course, was very wrong and foolish to kill herself; but I can't help hoping that he will have some difficulty in forgetting that if he had shown a little more humanity, and a little less zeal for morals, he would not have stood in his present unenviable position."

"I feel rather angry with him too," said Lady Llandrindod. "I remember Monday quite well. It was the day we drove, and I pointed out Mary Redwing to you. She, you see, had been offering the poor girl work. That must have seemed something of a reproach to our upright young farmer."

The story of Jenny Brecon was discussed in the village and the neighbourhood generally. Public

opinion, on the whole, condemned the action of Peter Davidson. Those whose wagging tongues had driven her grandmother away from the town, on the day of the tragedy, were not the least loud in their disapproval of his hardness. After all, they only wanted something to talk about, and it mattered little to them whether they sat in judgement upon Jenny or upon Peter. The sensational end of the girl naturally turned sympathy in her direction.

Mary Redwing heard of the tragedy with a paling face. It was not for nothing that the air had seemed, on Monday, to hold a threat.

She went up at once to Mrs. Brecon's cottage. Here she found the old woman chopping wood as if nothing had happened.

"They wanted to keep me up at Maes Derwen," she said; "but Willy'd never think to send for me there, and he'll shu-er to want me go live with him now Jenny's dead. She was a good girl; she favoured him. He was always fair, from a baby; an' I mind the first time his father cut his hair. It was like a bit of corn. I am show it you sometime, maybe."

Mary heard her in wonder. The day before the old woman's mind had been as clear as her own.

Mrs. Brecon paused in raising the hatchet to split a small log.

"Why, Willy's dead too, aint 'e? Well, I never! How I do forget, to be shu-er. He died of his throat, and so did Jenny's mother. Well, to be shu-er, to be shu-er!"

She chuckled softly.

"So I can't go and live with him, can I, Mrs. Redwing? Why, there's another gardener got the cottage now, and Jenny's lived with me this fifteen year, except when she lived up at Maes Derwen. There was something I wanted to ask you whatever, an', indeed, I don't know what it was. I know" — she scrambled up from her knees. "Will you please to help me move the chest of drawers? I got Bob Morris lift her out of the cart yesterday, an' he stood her down in the kitchen, and Jenny has n't come in yet."

Mary followed her into the cottage, and pushed the piece of furniture for her into its place.

"Is there anything I can do for you?" she asked.

"No, that's all," said Mrs. Brecon; "I'm glad I did n't sell her. She's a tidy bit. The room looks as nice again with her, an' I can do without the money, too. Mrs. Redwing was give me six shillin's yes'd'y, and Miss Davidson says I shall never want for anything. Do you think they'll take Jenny back? She's gone over there to see."

Mary made an evasive answer.

"Peter Davidson's a hard man," said Mrs. Brecon then; "a hard man. He turned her away from the door. I stood here waitin' for her all last night. Did you hear the rain?"

"Yes," said Mary. She had lain awake listening to it beating on the roof.

She went home presently. Mrs. Brecon had, ap-

parently, but an occasional inkling of the blow that had fallen upon her.

On all sides Mary heard the tragedy discussed. She tried to keep clear of the gossip, and resolutely abstained from expressing any opinion as to the conduct of Davidson in refusing to take the girl back to work at the farm. Many of the neighbours dropped in in the course of the day, to talk over the all-absorbing subject. Mary heard them so far as it was possible in silence. It was long since Maen Gorsedd had been the scene of anything more exciting than an affray with poachers, or an election fight, when beer, blood, and politics ran high.

"I say it's a lesson to all," said Abel Wynne, at the Cambrian Arms, on the day after the inquest; "a lesson to young girls to keep decent and respectable, an' not carry on with men as go away and marry some one else in another parish; an' to masters, too, not to be too hard on errin' humanity. We are told in Holy Scriptcher that we have all erred and strayed like lost sheep."

"That's in the Church of England Prayer-Book," said John Jones, who belonged to Salem Chapel. "That ain't Holy Scriptcher. That's the words of man."

"Well, indeed it goes something like that in Holy Scriptcher too," said Abel Wynne. "Let see, how is it? It calls us sheep, I know, because I've hoften thought as sheep did n't stray more than other animals if they was n't watched, however. There's them



cows o' Mister Effance always findin' a gap in the hedge to get through. If there was a pound now in Gorsedd, there 'd be more cows an' pigs and such in it any day than sheep, I know."

"We should n't like Holy Scriptcher to call us cows nor yet pigs," said Andrew Jones, who had followed his father from the forge.

"It calls us sheep, I know," said Abel. "I wish I could mind how the words go."

James Humphrey was sitting on the bench. He had caught a few words of the talk and now his distant treble made itself heard.

"All we like sheep have gone astray," he quoted.

"That 's it!" cried the wheelwright triumphantly; "that 's it! that 's Holy Scriptcher! That 's Bible, that is. I knew we was to learn a lesson from sheep. An' Mister Davidson had ought to have thought of it that we are but worms, an' all of us liable to stray from the fold, before he refused to give that poor girl another chance."

"At th' inquest," said Andrew, "the coroner said as no blame attached to him."

"Nor yet we don't blame him," said Abel; "all we say is as it's a lesson God A'mighty has seen fit to provide for him an' for all of us—for me, an' for you, Andrew Jones, an' for James Humphrey here, as knows his Bible better than any of us; an' for Mrs. Pughs, too, I dessay."

The landlady here took offence.

"I don't know where any lesson comes in for me,"

she said, tossing her head. "I'm a respectable married woman, as maid, wife, and widow's never had the need o' learnin' anything from poor girls as come to grief. I've kept the Cambrian Arms this twenty year an' got my licence regular. You leave the Lord to teach His own lessons, Abel Wynne. He'll point his morils better 'n you can, I'll be bound."

"Well, indeed, and whateffer!" said the wheelwright.

Mrs. Pughs whisked herself out of the bar, scolded Annie, and in course of time recovered her temper.

Jenny's funeral was the topic of conversation a couple of days later. Peter Davidson, it was agreed, did handsomely by her dead body. He was doing handsomely, it was further conceded, by her grandmother, whose rent he paid and whom he supported at his own cost. Then the nine days' wonder died out.

Autumn came on. The sound of the bees was silent, and the limes dropped their leaves into Mary's little garden. Life resumed its normal evenness. The shortening days seemed to add to the sense of comfort and security that pervaded the inside of her cottage. Winds might blow and the trees be stripped bare and signs of the approach of winter manifest themselves in damp and cold and fog, the firelight flickered but the more brightly on the walls and danced in reflection but the more gaily in the shining surfaces of plates and tins.

Peter Davidson kept away from Maen Gorsedd.

He occupied himself on his own land and showed himself little to the outside world except on market-days, when it was necessary that he should drive into Borderhampton to attend to his affairs.

Miss Hannah Rees came down once or twice from the New Farm to the village and upon one pretext or another called on Mary Redwing. She wanted a new button sewn on her cloth coat and had not one to match the others at home. Mrs. Redwing had not either. Well, then it did not matter, and Miss Rees lingered and asked a few questions. Or she wanted to know whether Mrs. Redwing would advise red or black ribbons on a hat she was going to trim for herself. Mrs. Redwing could not tell without seeing the shape. Well, that did not matter either. How dull it was, was n't it? They never saw any one up at the New Farm.

"Of course it's different for you, Mrs. Redwing," she said. "You see people every day. Livin' here on the highroad, as it were, of course folks come drop-pin' in."

Mary said that the neighbours were very friendly.

"And then, of course, there's visitors that is n't exactly neighbours," said Hannah.

Mary was silent.

"I think, p'r'aps, I'll have red ribbon, after all," said Hannah. "Particular as I may have to wear the hat at a weddin'. Shall you go to it, do you think?"

"Whose weddin'?" said Mary.

"You'd heard Miss Davidson was to be married

this side of Christmas. Mr. Morgan's tired of waitin' and she's fixed the date at last. Father saw Mr. Davidson yesterday. Did n't you know?"

"No, I did n't know," said Mary.

"I wonder her brother did n't tell you."

Mary was silent again. She had no intention of gratifying Miss Rees's curiosity.

"Well, that's strange," said Miss Rees. "Of course we only heard it by chance — father happenin' to meet him; but I wonder you did n't know, for of course you see him very often."

She looked Mary full in the face with her bold eyes. Mary's own did not falter.

"I'm sorry I can't help you," she said, alluding ostensibly to the ribbons.

"Oh, it does n't matter," said Miss Rees; "I dare say I shan't have much difficulty in settlin' the question. I don't find things baffle me as a rule, if I give my mind to them. Good-day, Mrs. Redwing."

"Good-day," said Mary.

She closed the door, and went back to her work, and Miss Rees went up the street.

"He's been there every day or she'd have denied it," she said to herself. "I'll be even with her yet."

On the hill she chanced to meet Andrew Jones. He had been leading a horse newly shod up to the farm and was returning to the village.

"Cold evenin', miss," he said.

He was a handsome young fellow enough, and,

when there was no one else about, Hannah was not above exchanging a little banter with him.

"Been up to see Kitty, I know," said Hannah. Kitty was servant at the New Farm.

"Been takin' your horse back."

"But you did see Kitty."

"Well, an' if I did, indeed?"

"And kissed her, too, I know. Oh, oh, oh!"

"Well, indeed."

"There was n't any one else to kiss, that's what you mean?"

"No, I did n't mean that."

She went nearer to him. There was no one else to be seen on the road. A sudden wish to know her own value came to her.

"Would you like to kiss me?" she said.

Andrew took a step which brought him close to her. She moved back a little and stood still. He put his hand upon her arm. She shook it off.

"I did n't tell you to do that," she said.

"But you 'll let me kiss you. I want to kiss you now."

"I don't know. Stand back a bit."

His shining eyes attracted her. He was muscular, and tanned as his own apron of leather. His throat was beautiful.

"Which would a man rather kiss," she said deliberately, "me or Mrs. Redwing?"

"You," he said; "you," and drew nearer.

"Tell me why."



But he could not express the reasons that he felt. Hannah was full-blooded, large, generous, and stirred his senses.

"You think a man would rather kiss me?" she said. Her eyes were glittering. She had an inclination to let the lids droop over them, but she did not yield to it.

"Except, p'r'aps, Peter Davidson," said the young blacksmith.

That was a foolish speech. Hannah pushed him from her.

"Did you think I was going to let you kiss me?" she said. "Let me pass, Andrew Jones, and remember your place."

## CHAPTER VIII

MARY REDWING walked into Borderhampton one morning in October. She had some shopping to do, and she carried a flat bag made of matting in which to bring home her purchases. The day was bright and clear. Maen Gorsedd woods were ablaze with every tone of red and yellow. There were rich browns in the ploughed fields. Recent rains had lent the grass in the meadows a renewal of its greenness. The world was painted with gorgeous colours.

Mary looked about her with eyes that saw. She was keenly susceptible to the influences of Nature, and she felt her spirits rising as she noted each fresh beauty of the day. There was a soft wind ; the air was pleasant to breathe. It held the sweet smell of many autumn things. Walking briskly, with a light and buoyant tread, she watched the blue smoke that curled upwards from a bonfire in a distant field — curled upwards, and then was dispersed by little gusts of the gentle wind, to float like a thin mist through the hedge against which it was carried. She watched the flight of some rooks in the sky. Smaller birds, innumerable, fluttered about the hedgerows.

A bend in the road showed the red stone turrets and battlements of the Castle standing up above the trees. The sight of it reminded her of Lady Llandrindod, whom she had last seen on the day of the

tragedy at Maes Derwen, and she found herself thinking of Peter. It was now two months since she had seen him. The nature of her own work kept her, for the most part, to the house, and thither, for whatever reasons, since that fatal Monday, he had not turned his steps. She scarcely knew whether she wished to see him or not. The memory of his last visit to the cottage was fraught with that of many misgivings. They had gradually died away as day after day went by, and the thing which she had dreaded had not come to pass. All change, she told herself, held in it the possibility of disaster. Even now her only safety lay in disturbing none of the settled conditions of her peaceful life. It was better that Peter Davidson should not come to the cottage. But—she missed him.

The sun sparkled on a gate which had lately been tarred. So dazzling was the light that the bars were turned to silver. So might the gate of heaven shine, and this gate was black as night.

She pursued her way. Another mile brought her to the outskirts of Borderhampton, and then ten minutes' brisk walking into the town itself.

Borderhampton had uneven streets and sudden corners. The market-place occupied a large square in the centre of it, and from this the streets radiated and were crossed by others, like the threads of a spider's web. A large church stood in the principal thoroughfare, which had to separate itself here into two, like a river washing round an island. The jumble

of houses was curious. A black-and-white inn, with huge beams and hanging eaves, was wedged in between an ugly yellow chapel and the staring red-brick Town Hall. A factory stood up out of a small labyrinth of cottages, some of which were thatched, and some roofed with mellow tiles. Old walls of massive stonework round a garden were covered with thick ivy. A monastery had once stood behind them, and traces of it were to be seen in bits of hewn and graven stone let here and there into some of the oldest houses. A fragment of a Gothic arch was built into one of the walls of the Llandrindod Arms. The butcher's shop close by boasted the base of a carved pillar and a battered gargoyle. The exciseman's house was richest of all in reminiscences of a time when monks had chanted behind grey walls, and had fasted and done penances and alms in Borderhampton, for it was built almost entirely of stone from the ruins. Mary passed it on her way to the draper's in Market Street, whither her business took her, and she remarked, almost for the first time, the strangeness of the masonry.

Peter Davidson, coming out of the saddler's opposite, saw her pass. She did not observe him. He did not cross the road to join her, but stood for a moment on the pavement looking after her. He hesitated; and then, still keeping to his own side of the road, walked slowly in the direction she had taken. She went up Bridge Street, and through Denbigh Lane into Market Street. She stood for a few moments

looking into the window of the shop known as "Griffith an' Williamses," and then went in.

Peter loitered about. It was a quarter of an hour later when she made her reappearance. A large parcel protruded itself from the matting bag. She looked up at the clock over the door of the Town Hall, and having called in at a couple of other shops, and added to the weight of the bag, she set her face towards home. She met an acquaintance or two, with whom she exchanged a greeting. Peter determined that he would not reveal his presence till she should be quit of the town, and he allowed her time to get some way ahead of him before he quickened his pace.

How neat she looked in her plain black dress! he thought, as he overtook her. How supple was her figure, and how young, though Mary Redwing must be—no, he would not try to guess! There was a directness in her walk that pleased him. It was like the directness of her simple life, he knew.

She became conscious of the sound of his footfall and looked back. He saw the quick colour that rose to her face.

"Mr. Davidson?" she said.

"And can't I carry your bag?" he asked, when he had greeted her.

"It's not heavy," she said, smiling. "I won't trouble you, thank you."

Still he held out his hand for it.

"But you'll walk quicker than I shall," said Mary.



"We're goin' the same way," said Peter. "Won't you let me walk with you?"

She yielded up the bag to him, and then regretted the action. It was like parting with a protection. It took away from her the practical appearance which she had hitherto presented and gave her a holiday air. It made her hope that she would not meet any of the neighbours. In short, it made her uncomfortable, and a restraint found its way into her manner.

Peter became aware of the restraint, but not the cause of it.

"You don't often go into Borderhampton," he said.

"Only when I have to buy material myself," she answered; "and most of my customers choose it for themselves and bring it to me to make up."

A miller's waggon came lumbering along the road. The driver, making strange inward sounds to his team from aloft on his high seat, was powdered with flour. A coal-cart, laden with black sacks and driven by a blackened man, followed close upon it. The contrast was violent and arresting.

"It was like day and night," said Mary, interested.

"Or good and evil," said Peter.

"Ah, that is hard on the black," said Mary; "the coal is as useful in its way as the flour."

She had no thought of concealing a meaning in her words, but Peter found in them an allusion to his share in the events that led to the suicide of Jenny Brecon.

"You would n't think," continued Mary, "that black could look like white; yet I saw a gate to-day, on my way in, — we shall pass it presently, — that had been painted with pitch, and in the sunlight it looked a dazzlin' white."

She spoke of the thing merely as the result of an association of ideas that brought the recollection of it before her. But Peter was sure that she was thinking of Jenny, and silence fell upon him for a time.

Mary did not find anything to say, and thus they walked, side by side, for a hundred yards or so without speaking. A casual observer would have put them down as lovers who had disagreed; or, if he were of a kind less hasty in its conclusions, he might have thought of them as lovers whose mutual understanding was so complete that words could not make it fuller or more perfect. In any case, he would have held them as lovers.

It was the consciousness that this was the guise in which they must appear that tied the tongue of Mary, though she did not realize the part which the physical comeliness of each would play in lending plausibility to such a belief. It was for the observer, if he was intelligent and æsthetic, to trace his theory to the obvious if illogical argument, that if these two people were not lovers, they ought to be, so meet did the one appear to be the mate of the other.

In the scheme — were it possible — for the improvement of a decadent race, one could imagine Peter, healthy, vigorous, strong, picked out, in a

choosing of males, for the possession of all the best attributes of his sex. Without any unusual beauty, he had no blemish. His broad shoulders, and his limbs that were muscular and well covered with flesh, and the definite lines of his body, spoke to the wholesomeness of his outdoor life, as his teeth to the purity of the blood that ran in his veins. Equally could one see Mary Redwing selected for all that is most admirable in woman. Peter was not a boy. There would be younger men chosen; let them mate with girls. Mary was not a girl. There would be young girls chosen; let these consort with boys. Peter and Mary were made the one for the other.

But for a while no observer more important than a tinker tramping to Borderhampton, and a child driving a cow, passed them to spy upon them or to speculate upon their relations.

"Then you think I was hard, too?" said Peter suddenly.

"Hard?" Mary did not take in, for the moment, the direction of his thoughts.

"You meant," said Peter slowly, and stumbling a little over his words in an attempt to get the right ones, "that perhaps we can't always tell, and what is — what seems dark and — and all that, may only look so from one point of view. Here's your gate; it's quite black from this side."

"I was on the other," said Mary, answering only that part of his speech which she understood. "I was goin' into Borderhampton then. But I daresay it

would n't shine now. No; the sun does n't strike it in the same way."

"It only shone when the sun struck it in one way," said Peter. "It is quite black."

Mary looked at him with such manifest wonder in her face that he added —

"You were thinkin' of Jenny Brecon, Mrs. Redwing, were n't you?"

"No," said Mary.

"I thought you were thinkin' of her," said Peter. He did not explain.

"No," said Mary again; "I was n't thinkin' of her then."

"I'm always thinkin' of her," said Peter; "thinkin' and wonderin'. Clover wanted me to take her back. If I had listened to her, poor Jenny would be alive now."

"You can't take any blame for her death," said Mary. She had grown very pale in the last few moments. "You could n't foresee that; and if she had waited, you would have given her another chance, I'm sure."

"I should never have taken her back," said Peter.

"You would n't?" said Mary. "Even when you had had time to think?"

"I could n't change about what I think of a woman who has — gone wrong," said Peter.

They took many steps in silence then. Mary could not trust herself to speak. Her hands were trembling. Tears started to her eyes. She did not wipe them

away, lest he should see, and presently they rolled slowly down her cheeks. Others took their place. The autumn day was blurred. The trees in the sunlight presented to her a confused medley of colour. She heard the singing of the birds as from a great distance. She found herself wondering how the silence would be broken. Would he speak first, or would she be unable to restrain her inclination to sob aloud, and so break it?

The fear of this last helped her to control herself.

"Don't let's talk of it," she said, when she knew that her voice would not fail her. "We should not agree about this."

"Then you think a woman who has sinned ought to be taken back amongst good women?"

He did not speak combatively. He seemed to be asking for an opinion; but that he held to his own was very clear.

"Oh, good women!" said Mary; "good women! Good women have sinned before now, and women who have sinned have not been bad. Jenny was good. I have watched her with her old grandmother. Her gentleness! her kindness! They was wonderful. No one could be bad who could love like that. It is n't what a woman does that makes her good or bad — it is what she is; and Jenny's heart was good through and through. How can we judge? We know nothin' of the temptation she may have undergone —"

She had been speaking rapidly — vehemently almost — and she broke off suddenly.



"I ought n't to have said all this, Mr. Davidson," she said, in another tone. "I was sorry for Jenny. It all seems so sad. I should have liked you to think that there might be good in her, in spite of appearances. But you can't reproach yourself. You did what you thought was right."

"I did what I think was right," said Peter.

## CHAPTER IX

HANNAH REES and her step-mother were quarrelling. This was not an unusual state of things at the New Farm, where, since Mr. Rees's second marriage, the peace seldom lasted unbroken for more than a day or two at a time. John Rees rarely mixed himself up in any of the arguments or bickerings of his wife and daughter. When he was well enough, he put on his hat and went out at the first sign of hostilities ; when his gouty foot chained him to his chair, he played (somewhat inefficiently) the part of the deaf adder that stoppeth her ears.

The two women were as widely separated in views and opinions, habits and temperaments, as they were in years. Mrs. Rees the second was fussy and methodical. She was orderly to a fault. She possessed nothing the whereabouts of which was ever unknown to her. She used nothing that she did not put back in its place. Hannah was careless and casual. She was untidy, and mislaid everything. It was enough for a thing to have been last seen in her hands for it to be astray when next it was needed. If she took a book from the parlour, a gap in the shelf marked its absence long after she had finished it—and until, indeed, Mrs. Rees, to whom the void was an eyesore, went to the trouble of hunting for the missing volume, and restoring it to its home in the bookcase.

Hannah's needlework, when she had any in hand, strewed the rooms. A reel of cotton was left on this table, a pair of scissors or a thimble on that, and Mrs. Rees had once found a woollen shawl her step-daughter was knitting in the soup-tureen, into which Hannah had stuffed it.

"Well, I was called away," she said on that occasion, when Mrs. Rees remonstrated with her; "and you make such a fuss when I leave things about. You're always at me to put my work away. I'd put it away."

"But the tew-reen!" retorted Mrs. Rees. "Whoever heard of such a place? I shall be findin' pins and needles in the tea-cups next. I should n't be a bit surprised but what we was n't sent to our death-beds and graves one of these fine days by your carelessness."

"Oh, there!" said Hannah.

"And I won't 'oh there!'" said Mrs. Rees, with increased irritation. "The times and times I've spoken about it. I found your stockin's as you was darnin' on Thursday on the sofa in the parlour, and a pretty place for them to be if any visitors was to happened to come in!"

"There's such a lot of visitors, is n't there?" said Hannah.

Mrs. Rees was punctual. Hannah was dilatory and had little appreciation of the value of time. Before her father's second marriage, and when she ruled the household, with Kitty under her control, all the

meals had been movable feasts. The second Mrs. Rees made a revolution in the domestic arrangements. Certain hours were definitely fixed.

On this particular morning, Hannah had strolled in to breakfast some forty or fifty minutes after the appointed time. Her father had finished and had gone out. Mrs. Rees had begun to clear away the things that had been used, and Kitty had been sent about the house-work.

"See how you hinder me," said Mrs. Rees, as her step-daughter appeared. "I might have been half through my washin' up by now. The tea's stood and must be poison long ago. There was nice hot bacon if you chose to be down in proper time. You must eat it as it is. I was n't goin' to keep it warm for you."

"I'm sure I'm not going to eat cold bacon," said Hannah, curling her lip disdainfully.

"I don't know what you're goin' to do about it, then," replied her step-mother. "Kitty's sweepin' my room, and I'm not goin' to have her called."

"Where's the fryin'-pan?"

"Cleaned and put away."

Hannah went and fetched it.

"You might have saved yourself the trouble of havin' it cleaned," she said, as she laid the rashers in it and approached the hearth.

Mrs. Rees smiled. "I've made the fire up," she said.

The grate presented a black appearance. Hannah frowned.

“Well, there’s no one to blame but yourself,” said Mrs. Rees sententiously. “You should have been down sooner. Them as lie abed can’t have hot breakfasts. P’r’aps you’ll think of that another morning.”

“We shall have the breakfast-things about for some time, I can see,” said Hannah. “I’m going to wait till the fire burns up; and here I’ll wait, and there the breakfast-things shall stop, if it’s twelve o’clock before I can warm the bacon. I’m going to make some fresh tea, too.”

She fetched some wood, and littered it about the clean-swept hearth. She cut some bread, and waited till the fire was sufficiently bright behind the bars, and then toasted it leisurely; and when, at length, she had prepared her breakfast, she propped a book up against the tea-pot, to show that she had no intention of hurrying. She pretended to read it, and paused now and then in her eating to turn over a page with ostentatious preoccupation.

Mrs. Rees went about her household duties with every fibre in her body in a state of nervous tension. The sight of Hannah at her prolonged meal, while the clock told the advancing of the day, was to her as tickling to the soles of the feet. Her very teeth seemed to be on edge.

Hannah ate slowly, but there came a limit beyond which she could not make her breakfast last, and then she rose from the table. She left the book where it was. She yawned and looked out of the window.



"Who's goin' to wash up those things, do you think?" said her step-mother.

"Kitty, I suppose," answered Hannah shortly.

She chirruped to the canary in the cage that was suspended by a cord from the middle of the curtain pole.

"I wonder you're not ashamed," said Mrs. Rees.

"What's the good of keepin' a servant if she's not to wait upon you?" asked Hannah.

"Kitty's got plenty to do without havin' work made for her," said Mrs. Rees. "I shall speak to your father about the way you've behaved this mornin', Hannah. It's disgraceful. I've never been subjected to such conduct, never! When I was young, a girl would have had more sense of what was right and decent than to act so."

"Ah, there's been time for things to change since then," said Hannah.

The quarrel broke out in earnest. It wanted but an allusion to Mrs. Rees's age—a point on which she was sensitive—to bring matters to a climax.

"Never mind how long ago that is," she said, stamping her foot; "I was married to my first husband before I was nearly as old as you. And whatever I am, I have managed to have two, and you may think yourself lucky if you ever get the chance of one. You put the whole house topsy-turvy with your laziness and your slovenly ways, and I haven't even the consolation of thinkin' that you'll ever leave it to go to a home of your own. I had as many

sweethearts as I wanted when I was your age ; but there don't come many about here seemin'ly."

What was said after that — and much was said upon both sides — matters little. Nothing that Mrs. Rees's imagination could suggest could surpass so telling a thrust. It rankled in the mind of Hannah long after she had slammed the door between herself and her step-mother. It smarted there like the fevered burning of an inflaming wound. She put on a hat and coat and went out. She was in a mood in which she would have liked to break things — china or glass, or anything that would yield to destructive force. A pewter basin, holding water for the dogs, was standing in the yard as she left the house by the back way, and she kicked it savagely, upsetting it and frightening by the clatter of the metal upon the stones, the fowls to further noise. Hannah was elementary in her passions, and for that reason dangerous. She always killed an insect that stung her. The instinct of revenge — the most primitive instinct of all — was strong in her.

She took a path that led over the hill to wilder country than was to be found elsewhere in the neighbourhood. She had no object in her walk beyond that of a need of physical exercise. She could not have sat still just then. She clambered over rocks, and once tore her hand upon a sharp stone. The sight of her own blood pleased her. She smeared some of it on the petals of a white flower.

So she had no lover ! And other girls of her age

had lovers. Better to come to grief like Jenny Brecon than to suffer such a reproach as that. Did it show that she was unattractive? She thought of her plump arms and her smooth skin, and of her face as she had seen it that morning while she dressed, and she did not believe that she was unattractive. Andrew Jones had wished to kiss her; she had read it in his eyes. She was sorry now that she had not allowed him to kiss her. A man had looked at her once on the shore at Aberystwith when she had been staying there, and had followed her. She had gone into a shop, she remembered, to avoid him. He had been waiting for her when she came out, and she had evaded him, and finally lost sight of him. He was well dressed—a “gentleman”—why had she not allowed him to speak to her? In Borderhampton many a young man had looked at her and looked after her. She had had a mild flirtation with one of the shopmen at Griffith an’ Williamses; and one of the clerks at the post-office—the one with the yellow mustache, which he was always twisting—had asked her to meet him on the river-walk.

But none of these were, strictly speaking, lovers. Peter Davidson, at one time, had been a constant visitor at the New Farm. It was because she tormented herself with thoughts of him that she had refused to meet the post-office clerk, with the yellow mustache, on the river-walk.

And now Peter Davidson never came up to see her. She set her teeth, and thought of Mary Redwing.

Even by her she was reminded of the reproach of her step-mother, for her rival, too, must have been courted, judging by the age of Peggy, before she had reached the years which Hannah numbered. Her rage turned itself in the direction of Mary. Andrew Jones had unwittingly sharpened the edge of the hatred she bore towards her.

"I'll be even with her yet," she said, under her breath. "I daresay I'll find a way of payin' her out for comin' between him and me. How dare she! What can he see in her, with her calm face and her gentle voice? I'd like to hurt her. I'd like to make her cry out to me to stop. Oh, if I could get her in my hands!"

She clenched them as if already she had Mary's tender flesh in her grasp.

"It's easy enough to deal with father's wife," she thought presently. "I can serve her out every day. I can make the house uncomfortable enough for her; and I will, too. I just won't get up now in the morning, see if I do! She can't make me, and father never interferes. I'll have my meals when I like; I'll teach her how to treat me."

She smiled grimly as she thought of the innumerable small ways in which she could "spite" her step-mother. Her ingenuity would have little difficulty in inventing fresh devices with which to annoy one whose love of order and method laid her open upon all sides to attack.

But Mary Redwing was harder to reach. Hannah

knew, as yet, of no means by which she could touch her.

She looked about her, and saw that she had reached a hill known as Death's-Head Bank. Another valley from that which held Borderhampton and Maen Gorsedd lay before her. Down there, in the villages, dwelt many who spoke Welsh habitually, and to whom English was a polite and foreign tongue — so definite a boundary, between the Wales which was almost England and the Wales which was still partly Welsh, did the narrow chain of hills constitute.

A shepherd's path, steep and straight, wound down amongst the rocks to the cultivated lands below. Hannah paused and shuddered. Strange things were whispered about the spot where she stood. In years gone by a spirit had troubled the hill, so that after nightfall the path she had been following had been avoided by the country-folk, who would go a mile out of their way to take the road, rather than expose themselves to the thing that haunted Death's-Head Bank. An old woman who lived now in Aberllwyn had seen it as a little spark which perched first upon the ear and then slid down on to the back of the goat she was taking home. She would tell now how it had begun and continued to grow till it reached the proportions of a month-old infant, whose shape it took, and for "witness" she could point to the skin of the goat which met its death that night in a frenzied leap. Other tales were told. A tramp had been found dead upon the path with his sightless eyes dis-



tended. A little girl had seen a thing which she had thought was a wounded hare. The hand which she put out to touch it withered.

Old James Humphrey vouched for these, and Hannah had heard him tell of the laying of the unquiet one. A parson of sorts and other "high-larnt" persons had assembled in the valley below, and, accompanied by as many as were brave enough to follow, walked at midnight to the troubled spot. Each person carried lighted candles. According to the old man, at a certain point all of these were extinguished, except one which he carried himself in an old top-boot, and it was known that the spirit was with them. They journeyed then a long way praying the spirit down, and, as they walked with their candles once more burning, it followed, growing weaker and smaller till it had dwindled to a mere speck. This was imprisoned in a snuff-box, and carried to a lonely pool in the hills, over the border, where it was placed under the water, and where it would rest for the hundred and ninety-nine years which was the limit of the laying.

Hannah shivered again, and turned to retrace her steps. She was frightened. The water held the spirit safe, she knew — water, and the ground under a communion-table, and the hearse-house or dead-house of the church (the lowest room of a tower where in old days the bodies of strangers who had lost their way and perished were placed for possible identification pending burial), and the root of a hollow tree — all

these would hold a restless spirit down ; nevertheless, she was frightened. She did not stop till she was on familiar soil. By then the anger against her step-mother and Mary Redwing had reasserted itself. She could lash herself to fury over an injury. Her passions were masterful.

She reached the brow of the hill, and looked down. Maen Gorsedd lay before her, and the roof of Mary's cottage was visible to her from where she stood. The Borderhampton Canal ran through the valley. It made a bright line of silver in the sunlight. A barge looked like a long blot in its course, and Hannah could see a bridge and a lock that broke the narrow shining streak. What colours were flaming in the trees ! The fierceness of them suited her mood. There was orange that was like fire, and crimson that was like the colour of the blood she had smeared upon the flower, and the berries that still hung on a mountain ash were scarlet as sin.

## CHAPTER X

SHE began to descend the hill. The road was muddy, and she laughed over the thought of the dirt she would carry into the clean kitchen of the farm when she returned home. But that would not be yet. Her late breakfast would allow her to stay out beyond the hour of the midday meal; and thus, without discomfort to herself, she would be able to gratify her hostility towards her step-mother by returning late for dinner.

The school-house stood in the road she was following, and as she passed it, she heard the sing-song of children's voices. She had not gone very far beyond it, when the hour struck at which the morning lessons were over, and the noise told her that the young scholars were pouring out.

The children came running down the road. Some of them branched off at a stile for a short cut across the fields to their homes. Peggy Redwing was walking with Andrew Jones's sister. They were both doing some extraordinary work with green and red worsted, on a frame made of a large reel and four pins.

The sight of Peggy renewed the rage of Hannah. She approached the child with a wish to torment her. She hesitated as to the method of working off her wrath.

"Good-mornin', Peggy," she said meanwhile.  
"Your mother quite well?"

"Quite well, thank you."

"You run along, Maggy Jones; I've got a message for Peggy to give her mother."

The blacksmith's daughter dropped behind, and joined some other little girls.

"We'll go across the fields," said Hannah. "It's a shorter way home for you than by the road."

Peggy shook her head. "Mother told me I was n't to go by the fields to-day," she said then. "I was to keep to the road."

"Why?"

"Because the grass would be wet."

"It's not wet now," said Hannah. "There has n't been no rain since last night."

"Mother said I was n't to," said Peggy.

She looked regretfully after Maggy Jones, who had passed her. Most of the children were on in front now.

"You little fool," said Hannah, under her breath.  
"I've a good mind to make you."

She glared at the child for a moment. Peggy had looked back to her work, and did not see her expression.

"Well, I'll walk a bit of the way along the road with you," Hannah said aloud. If she could not bully the little girl, she might question her. "I daresay your mother's right. I suppose she'll be very busy soon, makin' the clothes for Miss Davidson's wedding?"

"I don't know," said Peggy.

"Are n't the things ordered yet?"

Peggy pushed back her hair, which fell into her face.

"I don't know," she said again.

"Well, the weddin's early in December, and we're more than half through October now. Perhaps your mother won't have the makin' of them; but Miss Davidson goes to see Mrs. Redwing often, does n't she?"

"She came in yesterday," said Peggy. "I dare say it was about the dresses. Mother's gone into Borderhampton this morning."

"You like Mr. Davidson, don't you?" asked Hannah.

"Oh, yes," said Peggy.

"Does he give you sweets and things sometimes?"

"He gave me a picture-book once."

"Oh, he gave you a picture-book, did he?" said Miss Rees. "I suppose you see him very often?"

"Sometimes."

There was a pause after this.

"You don't remember your father, do you," said Hannah, then.

"No; only mother. There's always been mother."

"I forget what he was."

Peggy did not understand, and Hannah explained herself.

"How he got his livin'. Was he a farmer, or a workman, or a soldier, or a sailor? He must have been something."



"I don't know, indeed," said Peggy. She had caught the 'indeed' of the neighbourhood. "He did n't wear workman's clothes. Mother's got a photograph of him. He's got such a funny thing on his head, and a black thing over his clothes."

Miss Rees's manner was pleasant.

"What sort of a thing on his head?"

"Such a funny thing. I've never seen anything like it, and you can see his own hair under it at the back. I asked mother what it was, but she said I was n't to ask questions."

Hannah pricked up her ears. "A hat?"

"No," said Peggy doubtfully; "I don't think it was a hat. I only saw it once. Mother keeps it locked up."

Hannah thought a moment. "You've lived here quite a long time, have n't you? Where did you live first?"

But Peggy did not know, and Hannah deemed it inexpedient to press her inquiries further. She knew that if she interrogated Peggy in and out, either upon the subject of Peter Davidson or this new subject of the child's father, Peggy might speak of the catechism at home. Accordingly, having made up a message for her to deliver to her mother, she let her go. But she pondered on what she had heard.

Peggy ran on when she was dismissed, and Hannah continued her way. She had still no inclination to go back to the New Farm. She looked at her watch, and decided that she would take the lane that led into

Borderhampton Road, and go home round by Maen Gorsedd Woods. By the time she accomplished that, she would be sufficiently late for dinner to occasion Mrs. Rees the liveliest annoyance.

And so it chanced that Hannah was witness to the lover-like walking of Mary and Peter. They did not see her as they passed the turning of the lane down which she was coming. As soon as they had gone by, she darted forward and looked round the corner after them.

They were walking side by side, Mary with her eyes on the ground, Peter with his head turned towards Mary. He was carrying a bag that was obviously hers. It was not the custom about there for the men to ease the women of their burdens, except under the unusual conditions of "courtin'," and Hannah drew her inference. She stood looking after them (ready at any moment to conceal herself behind the hedge if they should happen to look back), till a bend in the road hid them from her sight.

She began to walk after them. If she could separate them! If she could find out something to the disadvantage of Mrs. Redwing!

When she reached the bend, she saw that Peter Davidson had gone on ahead and that the dress-maker was carrying her own parcel.

"Didn't want to be seen, did n't they?" she said to herself, quickening her steps.

As soon as Peter was out of sight, she overtook Mary.

"A nice mornin' for walkin'," she said. "Been into Borderhampton, Mrs. Redwing? I saw Peggy comin' out of school. She's gettin' a big girl, is n't she?"

"She grows very fast," said Mary.

"She's not very like you, is she?" pursued Hannah. "Your hair's dark, and Peggy's is quite a yellow colour."

"Peggy's very fair," said Mary.

"Some children take after one, and some after another," said Hannah. "I took after my own mother. She had brown hair — not black, like father's wife — and big brown eyes. Miss Davidson's a sort of piebald, is n't she, from trying to take after both? Peggy, I suppose, takes after her father?"

"Yes," said Mary shortly.

Something in her manner bade Hannah desist. They were approaching the village now. Hannah looked at Mary's bag.

"I sent you a message by Peggy to ask if you thought you could do up my brown dress to wear this winter. But I suppose you'll be backwards and forwards all the time now between Maen Gorsedd and Maes Derwen, till you get Miss Davidson's things done?"

"I shall have a good deal to do for the next week or two; but I could work for you after that, Miss Rees."

"I daresay I shall manage till then. How heavy your bag must be, Mrs. Redwing!"

Mary coloured. "Oh, not very," she said.

"But does n't your arm ache, carryin' it all this way? It's four miles from Borderhampton. It's far enough without carryin' things; and even if a parcel is n't very heavy, it gets heavy in the long run."

She looked Mary in the face.

"I'm accustomed to carryin' things," Mary said.

"And you've carried this all the way and don't feel tired?"

"The parcel is nothing to tire one," said Mary.

"Liar!" said Hannah to herself. "But I'll make her tell me.—And nobody offered to carry it for you?"

"What do you want to find out, Miss Rees?" said Mary suddenly. She spoke quite quietly.

Hannah was taken aback. She saw that this woman, with the gentle manner, had forces at her command which must be considered in entering into conflict with her. But Hannah had nothing to lose by a declaration of war. She recovered her surprise at once, and reviewed the situation rapidly.

"Peter Davidson was in Borderhampton this mornin'," she said with an unpleasant smile.

"Well?" said Mary.

"He's not very far in front now," continued Hannah. "It's a goodish bit out of his way to come round by Maen Gorsedd, with Borderhampton at one end and Maes Derwen at the other. But he's always kind and considerate. We used to think him a pleasant companion up at the New Farm. But that's

some time ago, and he don't trouble us much with his presence. P'r'aps, after all, it's not so funny your arm don't ache, Mrs. Redwing. But why did n't he carry your bag right to your door, I wonder?"



## CHAPTER XI

HITHERTO Mary Redwing had not had an enemy in Maen Gorsedd. She was not of the kind that makes enemies. She bore herself friendly to all men, and her tongue was not an unruly member. Now she had an enemy whose enmity was avowed.

"Will you walk on, Miss Rees?" she said, still quietly, "or shall I? I refuse to walk with you, and be subjected to your rudeness to me."

She was very pale, but her voice did not tremble.

Hannah laughed. "Oh, I'm goin' home," she said. "You need not trouble to stand still. I'm goin' to turn up here by the fields. I've said all I wanted to say—for the present. It's nothin' to me who you walk with or who you don't. But to hear you sayin' your arm was n't tired, just as if you'd carried your bag all the way yourself—well, it was funny!"

She laughed again, and, turning out of the road by a gate, took the path towards the woods. Mary made no answer. Her agitation showed itself only in her quickened pace. She was soon at home. Peggy met her at the gate.

"I'm very late, dear," Mary said. "You've had your dinner, I hope? That's right. I'll go in and have mine."

But she did not sit down to the meal at once. She put her bag on a chair, and went into the inner room.

She locked the door, and threw herself beside the bed. She did not cry.

Peter Davidson, meanwhile, walked homewards with a heavy heart. Mary had changed towards him, he thought. She blamed him, he was sure, for the death of Jenny Brecon. She could not forgive his hardness. Perhaps she was thinking now that, after all, she had never really known him. Clover, he knew, though she said nothing to remind him of it, and though her manner to him was even more affectionate than of old, still held that he had been unnecessarily severe. Was he hard? Was he severe? When he refused to take Jenny back into his employment, the thought of Mary as a possible mistress of Maes Derwen had not been entirely absent from his mind. He would not have liked her to be brought into contact with a girl who had fallen. He thought now of her defence of women in such a case. It was her own goodness and her ignorance of sin, he said to himself, that made her so charitable.

Why had he spoken of Jenny at all? But for his mention of her, they might have talked of happier things. How he had missed the sight of Mary all this time! But the sight of her had renewed his restlessness. He regretted every yard of the way that had been lost to him before he overtook her, and after he parted from her at the outskirts of the village. He thought of the silences that had fallen — silences that now he felt he could fill with eager words. This day must be added to those that held lost opportunities.

Hannah Rees, on the contrary, went her way, feeling that her morning had not been altogether wasted. She could not count it nothing to have harassed Mary so effectually. She had not, it is true, forced her to make the admission for which she had hoped ; but she had had the enjoyment of letting her know that her walk with Peter had not escaped the observation which the fact that he had left her before entering the village made it presumable that she had wished to avoid. So much for the satisfaction the day had brought to Hannah Rees. The other scale held the knowledge that, whatever she might have suspected hitherto of the terms upon which Mary and Peter stood, the evidence of the last half-hour seemed to put the nature of their relations beyond the range of doubt. Miss Rees set her teeth.

If she could separate them ! she thought again. Peter had unswerving views of right and wrong. If she could discover something to the detriment of Mary ! But Mary's life was one which all who ran might read. It was open and honest as daylight. There was little chance of finding, in a thing so orderly, occasion for blame. She looked back, over the years that she knew of it. In them she could remember no divergence from the even path. The very needlework of the dressmaker was conscientious. She spared herself no pains.

But eight years were comparatively a small part of thirty. What of her life before her advent to Maen Gorsedd ?

Dinner was over when Hannah reached home. The table in the parlour had been entirely cleared, and everything put away. No provision whatever had been made for her return. The kitchen showed a tidy emptiness. Kitty was not to be seen, nor did she answer to Hannah's call. The clock ticked very loudly, and a log cracked in the fire. The sounds seemed to lay stress upon the absence of sounds human. Hannah looked into the scullery. It also was empty, and it was equally tidy. The sink was clean, the plates had been washed and put into the rack, the tub was on its side, to allow the water to drain out of it. Some tea-leaves, kept from breakfast for further use in the sweeping of carpets, lay on a small dish. Hannah, who was looking for signs of the remains of dinner, curled her lip in disgust as she saw them.

"S'pose I've got to get things for myself," she said, below her breath, and approached the larder.

The door was locked. Hannah wrung the handle fiercely. She turned it to the right and to the left, and rattled the door. Through the iron grating she could see the sirloin of beef upon which the rest of the household had dined, and a dish of potatoes which had been hot, presumably, and now were cold, and a piece of a goodly apple-tart, and a cheese, to say nothing of such other eatables as the remains of a hare, which had appeared at supper the night before, and a cake or two, and some pastry, besides the bowls which contained dripping or jelly. Everything

was in the larder—the very bread, the cider-cask, the beer-barrel.

“Wants to starve me, does she?” said Hannah, and shook the door again.

She was hungry now, and the sight of the food she could not reach whetted her appetite. She went back to the kitchen. Not a crumb lay on the well-scrubbed table. She looked once more into the parlour. It held no sign of a meal ever having been eaten there.

“She must have hurried, just to spite me,” said Hannah to herself.

In the cupboard stood the shining glasses, and the tankard from which Mr. Rees was wont to drink. But not so much as a biscuit was to be found.

Hannah went back to the kitchen. She looked round. There were some hams hanging from a beam, but she could make no use of these. Many other things, good in themselves, were within her reach, such as dried herbs, and the contents of the tea-caddy, and those of the salt-box, and of an old-fashioned cruet-stand; but food, as food, there was none.

She went again to the back door, and called Kitty. She advanced a few yards, and called again. She went to the dairy and to the cowhouse, without result.

“I’ve a good mind to kill a chicken,” she thought, her brow lowering as a thunder-cloud; but considerations which took a physical repulsion to the act, and also a brief computation of the time and trouble that the preparation of such fare would involve, com-



bined to prevent her from carrying the idea into execution. She thought then of boiling or frying some eggs, and went so far as to look in the nests, in which she found a couple, before she remembered that she could not eat eggs without bread, and the bread was locked up in the larder.

There seemed nothing for it but to wait till her step-mother returned, and so, having fetched an apple or two from the orchard, to stay the immediate demands of her hunger, she returned to the house.

She drew a chair up to the hearth, and sat by the fire. Her boots were muddy, and she took care to leave as many traces as possible of soil and damp upon the polished bars of the steel fender. Mrs. Rees should suffer for this! Hannah bit her apple viciously. Perhaps her step-mother meant to stay out past tea-time. Hannah decided that that was improbable, for her father would come in at five. She would tell him the way this new wife of his treated his daughter. How long would she have to submit to living under the same roof with the woman she hated? If she had but a home of her own! This took her back to Mary Redwing, but for whom Peter Davidson would perhaps have asked her to share his. There was every reason for supposing now that he would need a wife. Clover's marriage was approaching, and when she left Maes Derwen, who would housekeep for him? Even if he were not at this moment contemplating matrimony, circumstances would shortly enforce it upon him; and

Hannah did not doubt that, had Mary Redwing not existed, it was she herself upon whom his choice would have fallen.

The canary in the window began to sing shrilly. The thin autumn sun caught his cage, and made the bars shine like silver. Hannah, turning impatiently, saw in the golden bird in the silver cage only a thing bent on annoying her. She caught up a kettle-holder, which hung on a nail in the wall, and threw it angrily at the offender. It struck the wires, and the canary flew in panic from perch to bar, from bar to perch, for a few seconds, and was silent for a space, after which he continued his interrupted song. Hannah jumped to her feet, and darted across the room, upsetting her chair in her impatience. She pulled the blind down.

"I'll wring your neck," she said pleasingly, "if you begin again."

She remembered then that she was still wearing her hat and her coat. She divested herself of them, putting the one on the dresser, the other on the table, and returned to her place by the fire.

But for Mary Redwing!

What right had these widows to stand in the way of girls? It was a woman who had been a widow who had taunted her with having no lover. It was a woman who had been a widow by whose contrivance she was now dinnerless. How she hated both her rival and her step-mother! Her wrath against the second augmented her wrath against the first.

The frown deepened on her forehead. It was with a scowl that Hannah gazed into the fire, where the flames were slowly curling round the log. Her big eyes glared ominously. She planted her elbows on her knees, and rested her square chin on her hands. Her attitude had a certain masterful boldness. It was waste of time to wish the thing that was improbable, yet if she could discover that Mary Redwing was not free to marry — that she was not a widow after all, but had a husband somewhere living! If there were but some cause or just impediment on which to forbid the banns! She thought inconsequently of the thin wedding-ring, and of what she had that morning elicited from Peggy.

A sound in the yard told of the return of some one. It was Mrs. Rees, who came in presently, and before Hannah herself knew what she was going to do, she had struck the elder woman a blow with her fist.

## CHAPTER XII

A MONTH passed uneventfully for Mary, after the day of her walk into Borderhampton. In that time she saw neither Peter Davidson nor Hannah Rees. She went about her simple duties, trying to feel as if nothing threatened the peacefulness of her life, but the little world in which she lived held now one who loved her, and one who hated her; and she realized, with a tightening of her heart-strings, that, for her, love and hatred were equally fraught with elements of danger.

At this period Mary Redwing, who had always been sociable, began to shrink from mixing with her fellows. She held aloof from the little groups that were wont to form themselves about a gate or a doorway for the discussion of the affairs of the neighbourhood. She dreaded to hear it said that now that Miss Davidson was going to leave Maes Derwen for Aberllwyn, her brother ought surely to marry. Every one was saying it, she knew. The words frightened her. They seemed to insist upon the insecurity of her position, for she could not be blind to the purpose of Peter. Mrs. Roberts, when she brought her baby on Monday, lingered for the express object of exchanging ideas with her upon what Mr. Davidson would do after his sister's marriage. Mr. Jones came over from the forge with the same intention. Mary made

the excuse of press of work to leave these two to talk it out between them.

She was happiest in the evening when the door was locked and the curtains drawn, and she and Peggy sat on each side of the fire — she working at Clover's dresses, and Peggy busy with her lessons. Then a sense of peace would steal over her. She would look up at intervals from her sewing, and her eyes would rest on her little daughter's shining head as it bent over a slate or a book. Something in the very cosiness of the room was reassuring.

One evening she was working busily with her sewing-machine, when there was a knock at the cottage door. That she should start at the sound spoke of a nervousness that seemed to have been growing upon her with the last few days. She put down her work, and went hurriedly to see who might be without. Peggy glanced up from her slate.

A gust of wind, admitted by the opening of the door, caused the lamp to flare. Some loose paper patterns fluttered down from a table, and were swept across the floor. Mary surveyed the tall figure standing at the threshold.

"Mr. Davidson?" she said.

Peter moved into the light. He was the bearer of a message, and some little parcel connected with the work which Mary had in hand for his sister. He delivered both. Mary's skirts flapped in the draught. He still stood outside.

"Won't you step in?" she said at last.



The invitation seemed to her to be drawn from her lips against her will.

After all, Peggy was there, she told herself. He took off his hat at once, and entered. The papers on the floor fluttered further as the door concentrated the draught for an instant in closing ; then they lay still, the flame of the lamp returned to its even burning, and the cosiness of the room reasserted itself.

Peter's eyes rested on the child absently, and then smiled as she rose to greet him. But Peggy missed something from his manner. He did not tease her, as was his wont — swinging her off her feet, or tickling her ear with the ends of her own hair, while he held her arms pinioned behind her back, or catching her up and holding her prisoner while she struggled. She looked now that he should suddenly make a dart at her, and held herself alert for a few moments expectantly, but he showed no signs of any inclination to play. She proceeded presently with her sums, and thought that life was disappointing.

Mary begged Mr. Davidson to sit down. And was it too late to offer him some supper?

Peter had supped. He took the chair which she had placed near to the fire as she spoke.

"I was just workin' at Miss Davidson's things," Mary hastened to say, as if she feared a silence. "I'm very glad to have the braid ; I was hopin' Miss Davidson would not forget it, but you need n't have troubled to come all this way with it to-night."

"I liked the walk," said Peter. "There's a wind

you can lean on to-night. It does one good to be out a night like this."

He looked at Peggy again absently. She pointed her slate-pencil at him like a javelin, but he did not feign terror, as she had hoped. Mary had sat down, and with an anxiety the existence of which showed the changes which the last few months had wrought in her she was wondering whereto this visit would tend. Her sewing-machine lay idle, and she wished that she had not taken the chair from before it to give to Peter. Had he occupied any other she might have resumed her position and her work. This would have lent her a confidence she was far from feeling where she was now sitting, with her hands in her lap.

"May I speak to you, Mrs. Redwing?" Peter said suddenly.

Mary's heart gave a leap.

"Yes," she said, trying to make her voice sound natural. "I hope Miss Davidson —"

"It is n't a message," said Peter. "It is n't about Clover. I — I want to have a few words with you alone."

He seemed to be speaking with difficulty. He rose to his feet. Mary would have risen also, but her limbs for a moment refused their office.

"You — you don't mind Peggy?" she said, with an attempt at a smile.

He bowed his head.

Mary recovered herself with an effort. She put her

arm round her daughter, and led her into the adjoining room.

"I'll call you back in a minute, darlin'."

"It's dark, though," said Peggy. "Can't I light a candle, and finish my sums?"

Mary lit one for her, glad of the moment's respite which the delay afforded her. Then she returned to the front room, shutting the door behind her. She drew herself up as she came back to face the interview that was before her. The action was involuntary, and almost unconscious.

Peter had turned, and was gazing into the fire. He moved round as she came in.

There was a pause. Each looked at the other. Peter noted the erectness of Mary. Her head was thrown back a little, so that the light of the lamp standing on the table laid stress upon the whiteness of her throat and chin. Mary saw that, while she now had full control of herself, Peter was agitated. His hand, upon the rail of a chair, was trembling. Incidentally she thought how strange it was that so strong a thing should tremble, and, as a rider to the thought, that it should be at her presence that it trembled. She waited till he should speak.

"You know what I have to say to you," he said at last.

Mary shook her head.

"Oh," he said, in a low voice; "but you do know —"

She did not move; nor did she answer.

"Speak!" he said. "You see how it is with me. You must have seen that I care for you, Mary Redwing, so as you are more to me than anything else in the world. You have not been out of my thoughts for weeks—for months. At night I don't sleep for thinkin' of you. I've waited to tell you. The words have been on my tongue, an', till now, I've never been able to say them. Have n't you known it? Did n't you know, long ago, in the summer, the last time I was in your cottage—ah, it seems years since then!—that I was here for the love o' you, Mary Redwing? I have waited, tryin' to see if I could get a sign that you thought well o' me, to help me to find my voice. But you have given me no sign, an' the words now have come out themselves—"

"Oh, I think well of you!" said Mary.

She seized upon the first sentence that she could answer without cruelty; and then, as she saw his face, she held her breath.

"Well enough to marry me?" He advanced towards her, his hands extended.

She drew back. "I did n't mean that," she said.

Peter put up his hand. "I don't want an answer now," he said. "Don't answer me before you have had time to think. You don't know what this is to me—"

Mary interrupted him. "I have thought, Mr. Davidson," she said gently. "It may sound strange to you to hear that, but I've seen this comin', and I've had to think. I would have stopped it if I could. It

is n't a matter of time. I can't marry you. Nothing can make my answer any different — no waiting. If I could, when I first saw that you was beginnin' to — to think of me, I would 'a' told you what I have had to tell you now."

Peter heard her in silence. She spoke very earnestly. He turned away and looked at the fire. Something in the movement nearly overcame Mary. But she had nerved herself to some purpose.

"You don't think that you could ever care for me?" he said, when some moments had passed slowly.

"I could never marry you," she answered.

In a short silence which followed, some leaves were swept up against the panes of the window. The wind was roaring in the chimney and round the walls of the house.

"But I love you," Peter said then, below his breath.

It was too poor an argument to give aloud ; yet it was the argument which has, it has been said, at some moment or other, seemed sufficient to justify half the crimes and half the follies the world has seen. Peter thought of his restless days, his troubled nights. Were they for nothing ? Was it possible that Mary could be indifferent to his suffering, or even ignorant of it ?

"Look !" he said. "I'll keep away for a bit, an' give you time to think. I can't take this answer now, I can't. I've kept away before ; weeks an'



weeks I have not come to see you, though my eyes have ached for a sight of you. Oh, I would wait for you! I would wait!"

Mary shook her head. "No waitin' would be any use," she said; "I can't alter about this."

Peter leant against the mantelpiece. "You changed towards me," he said. "You used to be different. What have I done?"

"It's nothing that you've done," answered Mary. She retained her composure with an effort. She held a bit of her apron, and looked down at it. Peter saw the straight white parting in her hair. How often he had thought of that smooth, dark head, and held the face in imagination between his hands. He was never to hold it so in reality, nor to fold his arms round the supple form, and draw it to him. "And I have n't changed to you," she added.

Peter was lost in thought.

"It's since the death of Jenny Brecon," he said slowly. "You had n't changed then. Ah, if I'd ha' spoke that day! I came here meanin' then an' there to ask you to be my wife, an' if I had, maybe your answer would have been different. It was Hannah Rees stopped me speakin' that time; an' then came the death of Jenny, an' I kept away because of that, an' since that you're changed to me. They've been tellin' you I'm a hard man, p'r'aps; an' you think it yourself, too. But what has my dealings with such as poor Jenny Brecon to do with what I should be to you? You'd never hear a rough word from me. It'd

be the aim of my life to shield you from harm. Your happiness would be my happiness. You can't be afraid of me? I'd lay down my life for you."

His face was fervent in its appeal, but Mary did not look up.

"Won't you tell me why, then?" he said at last.

"Oh," she said, "I have n't changed. It would n't have made no difference if you'd 'a' spoken then. Then or now, it's all one. I have always thought well of you, Mr. Davidson. I always shall. It is n't that."

She broke off. The garden gate had been blowing to and fro. It shut now with a slam, and the latch caught. The wind carried another shower of leaves against the side of the house. They struck the windows like spirits knocking for admittance. The thought that Peter would presently be walking through the stormy night was not the least inconsequent of those that passed through Mary's brain.

"Is it the child, then?" said Peter.

Mary looked at him quickly.

"Is it because of Peggy? Do you think I should n't be good to her? You know me better than that. I love her for her own sake, and for yours. I love her doubly. Can't you care for me? Is it that?"

Tears had forced themselves now into the eyes of Mary. He saw them. In a moment he was holding both her hands fast. She bowed her head, and the tears ran down her cheeks. She tried to withdraw her hands, but he held them tightly.

"Then it is n't that you don't care," he said, his face close to hers. "You would n't cry if you did n't care; an' you're cryin' now, Mary Redwing. You must come an' be my wife, an' we'll chase all tears away. Don't you know that I love you? Can't you read it in my face, an' hear it in the beatin' of my heart, as I can hear it now in the beatin' of yours, that I'm something to you yet?"

He led her to a chair. She sank into it, and buried her face in her hands, which he released. He knelt down beside her, and tried gently to draw them from her face. She sobbed for a time, unable to speak.

"It's no use," she said, as soon as she had recovered a sufficiently reliable voice for articulation. "It's no use. Now or ever I can have but one answer to give you. Don't think as I don't care that it grieves you. It hurts me more to say it than it can hurt you to hear it. And don't think me ungrateful, Mr. Davidson. I'm proud of the words you've spoken, and it'll be a happy woman that marries you. But it can't be me. Oh, take this for my last word, Mr. Davidson. I'd make it different if I could, but there's things no one can alter."

She rose to her feet as she spoke. Peter rose also.

"But these are only words," he said gravely. "You don't say that you don't like me; you only say you can't marry me. I can't be put off like that. Be fair with me. It's due to me to give me some reason."

Mary was silent.

"It is n't that you don't like me. You admit that?"

"It can make no difference," said Mary miserably.

"However much you like me?"

"However much I like you."

Peter knit his brow. He was face to face with a thing he did not understand.

"You must tell me," he said. "If you like me, there can be nothin' to keep us apart—nothin', nothin'. If you did n't, an' never could—but it is n't that. You've just said it is n't. Tell me your reason. It'll have to be a good one if it's to stand."

"Let me think," she said.

## CHAPTER XIII

BUT Mary could not think. Her mind became a blank. She tried vainly to grapple with the difficulty that assailed her. She put her hand to her head, and smoothed back her hair with the movement that Peter knew so well. He saw her shudder from head to foot.

"It's no good," she said. "I can't answer you to-night. I feel numbed and stupid. In kindness to me, will you go now?"

"If you wish it."

Her distress was evident. "I do earnestly wish it. I can't talk or even think. My head seems whirlin' round. You must n't believe I am goin' to change my mind. It'd be deceivin' you if I pretended there was a chance of that. But I must be alone for a time."

"To-morrow, then. I wonder how I shall wait till then?"

"It won't be only you that will lie awake this night."

Peter put out his hand. "Forgive me," he said.

"Nay, it's for you to forgive me," said Mary. "But I don't know how I could have helped causin' you your pain."

She watched him as he took up his hat and walked to the door. Neither spoke again. When he had closed it behind him, she did not move. She stared



across the room with eyes that for some moments noted nothing. Then gradually she became conscious that Peggy was calling to her from the inner room — had called twice. She roused herself with an effort, and having dried her eyes, she called back to the little girl that she might come in.

Peggy had finished her sums, and was full of questions.

“Don’t bother me now, darlin’,” her mother said gently. “Mr. Davidson would n’t have sent you away if he ’d ’a’ wanted you to hear what he had to say to me, would he? It was n’t about you, dear. Pick up those papers for me, there’s a good child. Now it’s time to go to bed. I ’m goin’ to bed presently, too.”

But long after her daughter was asleep, Mary sat by the fire trying to think out her case. The embers fell low in the grate. She had extinguished the lamp, and now the firelight had ceased to dance upon the walls. The room was dark, save for the faint glow near the hearth.

To tell him or not to tell him? Would anything but the truth serve to turn him from his purpose? She looked ahead and saw herself hiding from him, avoiding and evading him. Would it be possible to maintain such a course for an indefinite period, and to vary it only by the reiteration of the words, “I will not, nor will I tell you why,” at the inevitable moments when she was baffled in the attempt to baffle him? Would silence, however obstinate, suffice to meet the questions which it would be his to

ask? Would life be endurable under such conditions?

This was part of her punishment, perhaps. Sometimes, in the eight tranquil years that she had spent in Maen Gorsedd, she had wondered that no retribution fell to her lot. She had tried to think that past suffering had expiated her trespass. She had come to think so at length in the evenness of her peaceful life. But fate had been silently preparing this penalty.

What if she refused to accept the burden thus laid upon her? What if she did not resist Peter, nor tell him? She drew a long breath. No one knew. What difference had the thing that lay buried in her knowledge indeed made in her? If she were in truth that which she seemed, would she be one whit a better woman? She looked into her soul, and found it clean. She loved right, and hated iniquity. She was not stained. It was for the very reason that she had refused to account herself stained that she had been able since to lead an honest and unsullied life. Why, after all, need she tell Peter a thing which had not made her other than that which he thought her? To marry him, and to keep her own counsel, would only be to maintain the silence which had hitherto ensured to her the respect that is almost essential to respectability. And she was not unworthy of the confidence people had placed in her. Would even God, who saw the heart, condemn her?

Then she saw herself shuddering—in the very arms, perhaps, of Peter—for the oppression of the

secret that weighed her down. She had strength for much, but could she have strength in the years to come to guard it from the knowledge of the life that was lived alongside her own? There would be times of illness, and of anguish. Other children would be born to her, perhaps. Could she guard it then? Its weight would increase as the years went by. Every day would make it more necessary that its existence should be concealed. She would imagine a threat in every trifling divergence from the beaten course. If Peter came in before the exact moment at which she expected him, then would chilly fear grip her. He had heard, perhaps. If he failed to appear, he had met some one from out of those hidden days, who had told him . . . and he had left her. The wrong she had done him would be too deadly for pardon. Or, perhaps, between herself and him, would the thought of her secret throw itself with such persistence that, all untold though it was, she would shrink from him lest he should read it in her eyes or hear it in her voice. Then would she dread to be alone with him, and the hours so spent would be full of horror. Or vengeance might follow her as disaster the guilty Jonah, so that ill-luck, upon her account, would come to Maes Derwen, and its prosperity desert it. Or, if children were born to her, perhaps on them would fall the curse of the lie she was living out.

She put her hand to her throbbing temples. She had not strength to carry out such a deception as that. Better a thousand times to see him turn from

her at once in amazement and aversion. If she told him now, he would trouble her no more ; she knew that well enough. She did not forget Jenny Brecon.

But since it was impossible that he would understand, oh, the shame of telling him ! In the darkness she covered her eyes. Her hands could not shut out the sight of Peter's face.

If he were as other men, it would not be so difficult to tell him. Morals were not too strict, even about Maen Gorsedd. But she would not have had Peter any different. Else would he not be Peter.

The last spark in the grate died out, and, after a time, Mary went to bed, where she lay thinking, and thinking, and thinking, till the grey dawn crept round the edge of the blind.

The frame of mind of Peter, meanwhile, was scarcely less disturbed. He knew not what to make of the scene in which he had played his part. So painful was the impression it left upon him that he wished he had not gone to Maen Gorsedd at all that night. The moment, he told himself, must have been unpropitious.

The wind whistled round him. It buffeted and assailed him. When he met it full in front, as he left the village, it almost took away his breath. He had to step out resolutely against it. Trees were bending to the blast, and their branches creaked as they swayed. Overhead clouds were being swept so rapidly across the face of the moon that she seemed to be sailing in the opposite direction. From time to time

they obscured her, and there was darkness for a brief space, till first faintly through the ragged edges, then fully, as she got clear of them, her light shone out again.

Ah, to have had Mary with him now ! To have walked with her through such a night, his arm about her shoulders to support her in this frolic of lusty wind, his face close to hers, that he might hear and make himself heard ! He took the air deeply into his lungs at the thought. How fresh it was—like the cold crystal water of a spring in the hills !

But Mary had said that she would not marry him. She could not mean it. She had said it to try him. He had made it seem, perhaps, that he thought she was to be won easily. She wished to set a value upon herself. . . . He broke off in his sophistries to laugh aloud at them. The wind took the sound and swept it away as it swept away the leaves. There had been little enough of dalliance in the mind of Mary. He remembered her face, her voice. But he could not lose her. The words he had spoken after so long a delay had cemented his wish for her. She was more to him at this moment than she had ever been before. If he lost her now, something would be torn out of his life. It would be as the loss of a limb to the body. Without her, he would be maimed, halt, incomplete.

She had not denied that she liked him. Let him face the reason that kept her from him, and he would overcome it.



But her distress, and the terrible steadfastness — there was hopelessness and a sense of finality in it — of the voice in which she had spoken ! He remembered the eyes that had met his. She, at any rate, thought the obstacle insuperable.

No suspicion of the truth crossed his mind.

Voices and laughter on gusts of the wind reached his ear, and two figures, with draperies flying, came along the road. He recognized them as two sisters, whose names were lightly spoken in the neighbourhood. They greeted him merrily, and went on their way.

The sound of their laughter, broken and tossed as it was by the wind, jarred upon him.

He reached home at length. Clover had gone to bed long since, and the kitchen was empty. When his sister left him, if not before, would not Mary take pity upon him, and relent ? He could fancy her seated upon the high-backed settle by the fire, working in the winter evenings. It would be different work from that which she did now. She would mend his clothes, and make for herself and Peggy only, instead of for half the neighbourhood. She would knit and darn his stockings, and he would sit and watch her. He could not imagine her idle, so this was the picture he formed of her.

But when he had gone to bed, the distress of Mary haunted him. She was, sleepless too, to-night. He heard the hour strike more than once before he fell at last into a fitful slumber. He woke early, unre-

freshed and apprehensive. He rose and dressed himself, and went down to the kitchen. Clover was not yet astir. He threw open the door and looked out, wondering what the day might hold for him.

## CHAPTER XIV

IT was not yet fully light. The wind had dropped, but the disordered garden spoke of the hurricane that had worked its havoc all night. Plants were straggling and bent, and leaves and twigs and petals lay strewn on the beds and the paths.

The dimness in the kitchen made the black grate look the more desolate. He went in and drew back the curtains. There was no sun this morning, nor any colour in the day but cold, unpromising grey.

He got his hat and went out.

Everywhere about him he noted signs of the devastation of the storm. Here a tree had lost a branch, and the white splintered place that marked its loss was like a wound. He made his way to a field, where he had done a little planting earlier in the year, expecting, in his despondent mood, to find that the wind had played mischief with the tender striplings, but some happy chance had saved all but one. The matter was not much, perhaps, in the way of consolation; it served, nevertheless, to raise his spirits. It pointed to the good fortune that attended Maes Derwen. The luck of the Davidsons was proverbial.

When he returned to the house, it was with a lighter heart. Clover was down. A bright fire burned in the kitchen, which had regained its polished cheeriness. His sister was preparing breakfast, and there

was a pleasant sound of frizzling from the frying-pan over which she was bending, as she turned and moved something from time to time with a fork. The table was laid, and the teapot stood warming on the fender. A thin sunbeam struggled through the clouds, and illumined the garden outside. Rover ran up to his master, wagging his tail, and wishing him good morning as plainly as if he had been able to speak.

Clover looked at her brother as he entered. Lloyd Morgan, who dwelt on the outskirts of Maen Gorsedd, and heard naturally all the gossip of the village, had lately confided to her certain surmises of his own; and these, added to the observations she herself had made, had contributed to the correct guessing of the object with which he had left the house the evening before, though his ostensible reason had been that he wanted a walk, and that he might as well as not leave the little parcel of braid at Mrs. Redwing's. Clover, who had long been wishing that Peter would marry, regarded Mary Redwing as a possible sister-in-law with approval. To be sure, her handsome brother might have "looked higher"; but, on the other hand, there was no one, high or low, of whom she held a better opinion. With what a sense of relief would she be able to contemplate her separation from the farm, if she could know that her brother's fortunes were to be in hands so reliable. She had always liked Mary. There was a refinement in her that was lacking in many whose station was more exalted. The fear that Hannah Rees might one day reign at Maes

Derwen, had not been entirely absent from the anxieties of Peter's sister. Hannah was careless and untidy ; moreover, Clover thought there was that in her bold eyes that did not augur well for the happiness of the man who should marry her. Mary's ways were methodical as her own, and her face was a face to trust.

Peter said nothing, however, to enlighten her upon the events of the night before. He was not more pre-occupied than he had been for some time past. Clover could only wait and hope.

As soon as breakfast was over, he went out once more. This time he set his face towards Maen Gorsedd.

Mary, after her sleepless night, had risen at her usual hour. In her glass, as she dressed, she saw how pale and ill she looked. The dark circles round her eyes spoke of her vigil. She felt weak and tired, and little able to face the ordeal that was before her. The thought of it hung over her, oppressing her. She fancied that the condemned might feel as she felt, when the morning of their execution broke. At what time would Peter come? In the forenoon or at sunset, when his work was done, or later in the evening? Was her respite long or short? So severely was her mind exercised that several times in the simple round of her duties she had to pause to collect her thoughts, and to remember what she was about. She found once that she was holding the kettle in her hand, and that she was gazing at it as if ignorant of its use.



Again, in sweeping out the room, a couple of reels of cotton, which had fallen to the floor, were brushed up into the dustpan, and would have been thrown away but that they rolled about on the smooth surface of the tin, and so chanced to arrest her attention. "I scarcely know what I'm doing," she said to herself.

She laid the table mechanically. She was halfway through the preparation of breakfast before she recollected that she had not called Peggy, and that the child was still asleep. At breakfast itself, when she sat down to it with her little daughter, it was found that she had forgotten to put any tea into the teapot. Peggy laughed heartily, as her mother poured out two cups of hot water.

"I never noticed it," Mary said.

When Peggy had started for school, Mary found herself unable to settle down to anything. She broke a saucer in washing up the things. Would Peter come now? or now? or now? — at intervals of a few minutes. Was that his step? or that?

Presently she sat down, with her hands in her lap, waiting. She could do nothing else. She hoped that he would come soon. How dreadful this nervousness was! It was nine o'clock now. She heard people about in the streets, and hoped vaguely that no one else, at least, might come.

Would Peter have guessed? What would he think had been her reason? Why had she not declared firmly that she did not desire to change her lot? A

woman was not bound to give a man any reason for refusing to marry him.

"Oh," she said to herself, "you love me, Peter Davidson, and yet you are puttin' me into this cruel difficulty. Hannah Rees, who hates me, could not do anything to perplex me more." Then she found that she could not even sit still. She was like some sick person, to whom no change of attitude can give relief.

The step she had been expecting smote suddenly upon her ear. She heard the click of the gate, and, a moment later, she knew that Peter was standing at the door.

"Come in," she said, in answer to his knock.

He obeyed at once, and shut the door behind him.

"You have somethin' to say to me this mornin'," he said, when they had greeted one another in conventional terms.

Mary, looking at him, thought that he, too, appeared as if the night had brought suffering to him. He did not sit down, though she motioned him to a seat.

"I haven't any other answer to give you than the answer you had last night," she said.

"Ah!" he said; "an' that's the answer that I can't take. I can't; I can't —" He checked himself. "Let us talk it out together," he said more quietly.

"Oh," said Mary, "won't you be content that my reason is a good one? I can't be your wife, Peter Davidson. No thinkin' will alter it. No talkin' it out

will make it any different. There's things that nothing can remedy. I can't put it no stronger."

"I can't be content," said Peter.

"But I don't want to marry, Mr. Davidson," Mary said, with a faint hope of keeping her secret yet. "It is n't as I don't feel the honour you're doin' me. I shall remember with pride to the day of my death that you once wished me to be your wife ; but I can't change. I've settled down into the life here with Peggy."

"Then it is Peggy!" exclaimed Peter. "You don't want to give her a step-father. How'm I to make you know that I'll treat her as my own child, if you won't believe me?"

"I do believe you," said Mary. "I'm not afraid you would n't be good to her. It is n't that."

"What, then?" said Peter ; "what, then?"

He put his hands on her shoulders. "You won't put me off," he said. "Things have gone too far. You've got to make me believe you can't abide me before I can take 'no.' An' I don't believe that. I read it in your eyes that you don't dislike me. If you say 'no' to-day, I'll come to-morrow, an' I'll come every day, till I win you, in spite of yourself. Deny it as you will, I believe you love me now. Don't hold out against me. What have you to fear?"

He strove to draw her towards him ; but she held back. Mary knew then that she must speak. A wild hope came to her for a moment, as she felt the firm pressure of his hands. A wish to rest her head against

his breast came with it. But immediately she remembered Jenny Brecon, and what manner of man was Peter. She disengaged herself from his hands, and stepped back. She looked down at one of her own. By chance it happened to be the left. She twisted round the thin circle of gold that had been her mother's wedding-ring.

"I will tell you," she began.

Then, lest he should never look upon her again with love in his eyes, she raised her own, and took one long survey of his face. It was somehow an embrace, this steadfast, comprehensive gaze. It kissed his lips, his throat, his eyes, and again his lips.

He saw, with a cold fear at his heart, that about her mouth there had come a pinched look, such as he had seen once on the face of a woman who had begged from him on the Borderhampton Road, and who, though he had given her money, had subsequently died of the starvation that then had a grip of her. Mary seemed to have grown suddenly thin. She lowered her eyes to the slender thread of gold upon her finger.

And then she told him.

## CHAPTER XV

CLOVER'S wedding was over.

The world was icebound. The stormy autumn had ushered in a hard winter. Roads were as iron, and every rut held a brittle sheet of glass. People, who earlier in the year had shaken their heads over the abundance of berries on hawthorns and holly, now alternated between lamentations upon the severity of the weather, and pardonable satisfaction that their predictions should have been so amply fulfilled.

"It's dreadful bad for a body as do be gettin' on a bit," groaned Abel Wynne's old mother. "When I am dressin' me in a mornin', all the marrer's froze in the bones of my legs. An', indeed, I feel just as stiff an' as skimpy as a mawkin' (scarecrow)."

"Cheer up, mother," said the wheelwright. "It's not a white winter, nor yet a black, that makes a fat churchyard, they say."

"Well, indeed, an' if it was bring a bit of rest to the gravediggers, that's about all the good it does do whatever. Day in, day out, an' not a sign of a thaw. But it's only what I told you. I knew as well as well how it'd be."

"Keep up the fire, then," said Abel.

"It's only as I expected," said his mother. "All along I told you. 'Mark my words,' I said, 'we'll



have the frost upon us fearful'; an' you can't say but what I spoke true."

There was no denying the severity of the season. Many who were younger, however, and who were not possessed of limbs the "marrer" in the bones of which was liable to freeze, saw in the prolonged frost a thing that was invigorating, and not without its attractions. The pond in the green at the lower end of the village was covered from morning till night with sliding school-children. A few of the young men of the village brought down their skates at dusk. Andrew Jones skated on most evenings. Hannah Rees put in an appearance a few times, and even Lloyd and Clover Morgan walked over one afternoon. But Peter kept away.

Clover, in these days, was thinking much about her brother. She had yielded to the pressure which both he and Lloyd had put upon her; but she had wept copiously on the day that took her from Maes Derwen to her new home at Aberllwyn. Something had happened, she felt sure, something which affected Peter deeply. She dated the first change in him to the tragedy of Jenny Brecon. It was after that that he had gone about his work with so preoccupied an air; and again and again her eyes had rested upon him, questioningly, as she wondered what was passing behind the grave face. But, just before her marriage, it had grown graver still.

Apart from her anxiety on his account, Clover was quite content. The devotion of Lloyd Morgan

was all that the most exacting bride could have demanded. He was a carpenter by trade, and Clover always thought that a healthy freshness, which was his most salient characteristic, was reminiscent of the clean, sweet-smelling planks amongst which his life was lived. His eyes were brown as the knots in deal, and his voice was resonant as one of his own boards. His hair curled crisply, and made her think of the shavings that came dancing up in rings out of his plane as he plied it. A scent of pine wood hung about him.

Clover listened to him as he sang over his work, and feeling that she had cause for happiness herself, sighed the more deeply as she thought of Peter.

Miss Vaughan, the cousin of whom mention has been made, was now formally installed at Maes Derwen. It was many years since the Davidsons had met their relative, though she lived in the same county, and but some ten miles away. She had arrived, an odd little woman, with habits and superstitions that made her seem a relic of a bygone age. Her curious garments hung now in the room that had been Clover's. Peter used to start at first every time the sight of the quaint little figure met his eyes as he entered the kitchen. To see it in place of the tall, straight form of his sister gave him a momentary shock. The unfamiliar personality of his cousin seemed to pervade the house. She had brought many strange ornaments with her, and she decorated the dresser and the shelves, and the high mantelpiece.

Peter's tobacco-jar stood now on a fluffy mat made of white fleece, the tips of which were dyed magenta. A large workbox, adorned with shells, stood on the table in the window. Two blue candlesticks, with long crystal drops, balanced each other at either end of the mantelpiece. An alabaster image of a praying child (to which Miss Vaughan alluded, when she had occasion to mention it, as "my allyblaster Samuel") reposed upon another mat. A sampler, which was really interesting and curious in its way, and which had been worked by Miss Vaughan herself at the age of nine, was hung up on one of the walls.

All these things Peter bore in silence. They pleased his cousin, and if one or two of them — the blue candlesticks with the crystal drops, for instance — were somewhat of an eyesore, they did no actual harm. His life was very dreary at this period. He missed Clover more than he would have admitted. Miss Vaughan did her best for him, but her ways were not his, and he was in sore need of companionship. He walked about the farm disconsolately. There was little to do at this season, owing to the severity of the frost, and nothing that had the power to take his thoughts off the trouble that had come to him.

Miss Vaughan's interests centred in deaths and burials. He came in one morning from stalking grimly round his frozen fields, and saw that a part of one of the walls of the kitchen had been converted into a miniature cemetery of mourning-cards. There were seventeen in all. With varying degrees of black

border, they recorded the deaths of seventeen of Miss Vaughan's relations and friends. No graveyard could have looked more funereal. Some of them had silver lettering; some, type of several kinds; some were of a glossy smoothness that seemed to say they had cost a good deal; some were thin and meagre. The most sumptuous was that recording the death of his great-aunt, the mother of his cousin. The black edge of it was broader than that of any of the others. "In Loving Memory," it ran (in old English characters), "of Martha Jane Vaughan" (in Roman capitals), "widow of the late John Morris Vaughan" (in stumpy fancy letters), "who departed this life" (in italics), "aged 81 years" (in copper-plate). Then followed the well-known verse, beginning, "Affliction sore," the first word of which had somehow received an additional syllable, and read, "Afflication."

Miss Vaughan came into the kitchen as Peter stood looking at her handiwork.

"Indeed, I thought you'd be pleased," she said. "I brought these few cards down to begin with. I've got as many more upstairs. There's Uncle David, who died one New Year's Eve. You would n't remember him; but I mind it as well as well. O-oh! I do, indeed. He'd been ailin' for some time; but he was better that day, for I had been round first thing to see. Well, I was sittin' at the window when I saw Susan (that was his daughter, who did die afterwards of a decline) runnin' up the garden path. She'd come to fetch me. She could n't tell me for why. She

was just frightened, an' she wanted me to come an' stop with her till her brother came home. She said Uncle David was goin' on right well, but all of a sudden she was come over with a fearfulness, and she did n't dare to stay alone. Well, I was get ready, and go round with her as fast as I could, an' Uncle David was sleepin' as sweetly as a child. But Susan was restless, and kept lookin' over her shoulder. We was sittin' by the fire, when all of a sudden Susan says, 'What's that?' I went cold all over. I had n't heard anything. We sat still listenin'. It was gettin' on for five o'clock, an' it was quite dark. 'Hark! There it is again,' she says. 'What is it?' I says. 'Like a tappin' at the window,' she says. We was hold our breath to listen. Then, while we sat there, there was a sound, the like of which I did never hear before. It was a rustlin' of wings, an' a peckin' at the panes, and a chirpin', as if all the birds in the country was trying to get in at the windows. When we looked out, sure enough the house seemed surrounded with them — starlins', an' robins, an' sparrows, an' finches — they was as thick round the windows as flies, peckin' the glass, and cryin' to be let in. Uncle David woke an' heard them, an' when he knew what it was, he said it was all up with him. Presently, with a screamin' an' a flutterin' they was all fly away; but Uncle David knew the sign, an' stretched himself out to die. I've got his memorial upstairs. Just to think!"

She broke off with the first finger of the left hand



on her lips. Peter eyed the cards doubtfully, wondering how best to express his disapproval of their presence in the farm-kitchen. While he hesitated, Miss Vaughan went on.

“That’s Annie Jones you’re looking at — no, she would n’t be any relasshon of yours. She was first cousin to my sister’s husband. She did die of heart disease. Jane Andrews, there, was taken of a cancer. The doctors cut half her face away. Elijah Williams — he was our minister at home. He did die of a sickness as they did n’t rightly know what it was. All his teeth was drop out, one by one, an’ his nails — finger an’ toe. But Rosedew Thomas, hers was the strangest death of all. She used to keep the keys of the parish church. One Sunday mornin’ she was missed. The service had begun, an’ there was no one to open the pew-doors. Somebody go across to her cottage, an’ she was n’t there. An’ all day she did not come back, an’ she had n’t been seen since the Thursday, when she had been just as usual. Well, they was hunt for her high an’ low, till a whole week went by, an’ another Sunday comes round. It was a cold, drippin’ day, an’ when they was go to light the vestry fire, why, they could not find the wood. Then they did look about for that. Well, Silas Jones, who was gravedigger, fetched some from his own house ; but all along he got it in his head as he’d heard Miss Thomas say as she’d put the fuel somewhere where it would be drier. He turned it over this way an’ that, till, all in a minute, he was think of the

crypt. It was a dark place, right under the floor, an' there was an iron flap as shut with a clasp. There was old coffins in it, an' nobody was go down there for years. They lift up the flap, an' they see at once, by the way the dust was swept, it had been opened lately. On the top step they found Miss Thomas's candle, an' at the bottom a heap of wood as she must have put there to keep dry, an' on the floor, dead an' stiff—an' her face set in a grin, as they say, made the hearts of them as saw it well-nigh stand still—lay Rosedew Thomas herself. Indeed, it was as if she'd died of laughin'. That was strange enough; but what was strangest of all was that, in the crypt there was n't a coffin in its place, an' some of them lead, an' Rosedew Thomas a little woman as could hardly lift a basket o' potatoes whatever!"

"I don't think that they look well here," said Peter, as soon as he could get a word in.

"I did think I'd put them over the fireplace," said his cousin, who only saw in Peter's remark a suggestion that the cards were not shown to their full advantage; "but, indeed, it's so high we should n't be able to read them from down here. But I have got as many again upstairs. There's Anne Roberts, who was your mother's second cousin. She's threefold, with a verse on the outside; an' George Gwynne, of Fron Bryn, who married Caroline Vaughan; and—"

"I mean," said Peter slowly, "I don't think the kitchen where we sit is quite the place for them. It's different havin' one or two, such as father and mother."

Miss Vaughan's left forefinger went to her lips once more.

"You don't like them whatever?" she said, as if she could not believe him.

Peter shook his head.

"Well, indeed!" said Miss Vaughan.

Five minutes later she began slowly to take them down, looking at each, and reading it as she did so. Peter watched her.

"I did think you 'd 'a' been proud of them," she said, when she had dismantled the wall, and held the pile in her hand. "I do always like to see them myself, an' read the beautiful verses, an' think how respectable the family has always been in its deaths an' burials. But they shan't stop here for you to fret at, Peter. At home I had thirty-five over the mantel-piece, and they was always a comfort to me. Well, indeed, indeed!"

"There was no need to remove them at once," said Peter, who felt a certain remorse in having wounded his kinswoman's feelings. "They could have stopped where they were for a bit, till we found some better place for them."

"I am put them in my bedroom," said the little woman, unappeased. "They shall be where they won't bother you. But I shall be able to see them. Many an' many's the time when I have been ailin', I was look at one or another, an' read a text o' Scriptcher, an' think how all those sick an' sufferin' men an' women were playin' their golden harps

around the throne. Well, well. But I don't bear any malice ; an' if it do please God to take you first, I'll prize your memorial just the same."

"I don't know that I should care how soon that was," thought Peter, who, six months back, had loved life.

## CHAPTER XVI

HANNAH REES, sobered for a time, and frightened by the revelation of the mastery which her passions had over her in the action to which they had lashed her, preserved at home a humbler mien. Mrs. Rees's prediction that her ungovernable temper would bring upon her, one day, a dire calamity rang in her ears and woke an apprehensiveness that was partly superstitious. Then, little by little, her nature reasserted itself, and she forgot her penitence and her fears.

It may be that the sexual instincts had their part in the irritability of Hannah's nerves. She was a woman, and therefore had her functions to perform, in obedience to the universal law. The lack of a mate enforced sterility at a time when nature urged productiveness. Hence, perhaps, her energies, diverted from their proper course, expressed their grievance in the repeated exhibitions of what used to be called vapours or spleen.

Be this as it may, Hannah was in a state in which life, with her, under one roof, was not a thing of peace. Herself again, she turned her thoughts on Mary. Since the open attack she had made upon her, she had deemed it politic to keep away from the cottage under the limes. She met Peggy now on the ice, and asked her a few questions. She heard that Mary was ailing ; but as she knew nothing of what had passed



between her and Peter, she did not attribute the fact to any cause other than physical. She watched zealously for the sight of the young farmer in the village, and wondered what kept him from the frozen pond.

"Your brother is n't skatin' this winter?" she said to Clover Morgan on the day on which the bride and bridegroom walked over to Maen Gorsedd for an afternoon's exercise on the ice before going on to tea with Lloyd's parents. "He used to be so fond of it. He was always cuttin' figures — threes an' eights, an' I don't know what, last year."

"He can't spare the time, p'r'aps," said Clover. But, in truth, she herself wondered why Peter stayed up at Maes Derwen.

"You can generally make time for anything, if you want to do it," said Hannah.

"Then I suppose he does not want to," said Clover.

She was conscious of an inclination to be short in her answers with Miss Rees, whom she disliked cordially. Hannah, on her part, wasted no affection upon Peter's sister, whose influence she had always divined intuitively would be, perhaps had been, used against her. Still, she had no wish to quarrel with her, and she made some light rejoinder. Since Clover's marriage, the coast was clear so far as Maes Derwen was concerned. This now struck Hannah for the first time, and she made a mental resolution which she carried into effect a few days later.

She chose a bright, frosty afternoon for her walk,

and, having dressed herself carefully, she set out to call upon Miss Vaughan.

There was a thin sunlight, which picked out warm colours even in the leafless trees and hedges, and made the slabs of ice in the ruts and furrows to shine like metal. The air was keen, but it was still, and at the end of half an hour's walk Hannah was conscious that her cheeks were glowing. She knew, too, that her big eyes were sparkling.

Miss Vaughan and Jenny Brecon's successor, Jane Marton, were on their knees polishing the oak floor with beeswax and turpentine when Hannah's knock sounded. Miss Vaughan hastily untied the strings of her apron, and divested herself of it; then, having thrown it hurriedly to Jane, and unrolled her sleeves, she went to the door. She was not a farmer's wife, nor of the immediate neighbourhood, or she would not have been at any pains to conceal the fact that she had been working. Her small elegancies were the source of a trifling but frequent irritation to Peter.

She bowed Hannah in.

"Miss Rees, is it not, indeed?" she said, in the voice she reserved for company. "An' I am very pleased to see you. You were at my Cousin Clover's weddin', I believe, or do I misremember? I thought so. Will you please to sit you down?"

She drew a chair away from the wall as she spoke, and put it near the fire.

"Eh, but it's very cold indeed, an' you will have had a freezin' walk over the banks. You live at the

New Farm, don't you? An' I hope your father's pretty well, Miss Rees. That 's right. An' your mother, too, I trust?"

"Father's wife 's well enough, thank you," said Hannah.

"Won't you take your boa off, fee-er you catch cold when you leave this warm room? No? Rather not, p'r'aps."

Hannah loosened the long tail of cheap fur which she had bought recently in Borderhampton. She did not remove it from her shoulder, however, but left it there in the hope that Peter might come in presently and see how becoming it was to her. She looked about her.

"The room 's changed a bit since Miss Davidson married," she said. "There 's lots of new things I have n't seen before. What 's that little image, Miss Vaughan?"

"It 's not an image," said Miss Vaughan, with pride. "That would be Romish, that would. No, it 's not an image. It 's a little Samuel, an' it 's made of allyblaster. Look at him prayin' with his little hands clasped so pretty, an' his eyes lookin' up. It 's a perfect lesson, indeed."

Hannah duly admired it and the blue candlesticks with the crystal drops, and the workbox adorned with shells. This last Miss Vaughan opened for her, to display its velvet fittings and the white gold-starred paper with which it was lined.

"No, I never use it," she said ; "but it 's got every-

thing in it as you could want if I was to wish to: scissors, see, an' a thimble, and needles, fancy an' darnin', an' bodkins, an' reels, an' a yard measure, an' I don't know what, indeed. An' it's got readin' on it here, look. 'A Present from Llandudno,' where the shells was found, I daresay. It's a presentation workbox."

It was evident that the words conveyed to Miss Vaughan an idea of a workbox of a particular kind.

"Were you ever at Llandudno?" asked Hannah. "Did you buy it there? I've been to Aberystwith. There's sea there too."

Miss Vaughan shook her head.

"It was the gift to me of my only sister, who married a sea-captain, and afterwards did settle in America, where her remains was laid to rest."

Miss Vaughan broke off suddenly. Her little beady eyes had descried the jam-pot which held the bees-wax and turpentine with which she had been polishing the floor at the moment of Hannah's arrival.

"Well, indeed," she said, "an' if that girl has n't left her pot of wax an' stuff behind her. You'll excuse her, Miss Rees, I hope. You see, I was superintendin' her rub the floor when you came in. I am afraid there is a smell of turps as I hope don't discommode you whatever."

Hannah said she had not "noticed" anything.

Miss Vaughan, with elegant hands, took the delft pot to the door, and bade Jane take it away and be less careless. She then returned to her visitor and to

the subject of her sister and the presentation work-box.

"I prize it dearly for her sake," she said, taking her seat once more upon the high-backed oak settle on which she looked oddly diminutive — "dyin' far away in a strange land. But we had her memorial printed at home. P'r'aps you'd like to see it."

"I should, indeed," said Hannah, who was determined to extend her visit till Peter should appear.

Miss Vaughan bridled with pride and pleasure.

"Stop you one little minute, an' I will fetch it, then," she said.

She hurried from the kitchen. Hannah's lip curled itself in somewhat contemptuous amusement.

"I wonder how he likes her livin' in the house?" she said to herself.

She looked about her again, more freely now that she was alone, and she noted the impress which the personality of Miss Martha had left upon the room. It was not less clean or bright than in the days of Clover. Miss Vaughan did not in reality spare herself. She worked with conscientious industry, and as she shirked no trouble, perhaps her little assumption of elegance before strangers was harmless and pardonable. An air of primness, however, pervaded the comfortable farm-kitchen.

"There's a good deal as I should like to alter," Hannah thought, as her eyes fell on the fluffy mats, which somehow revealed to her their incongruity under Peter's tobacco-bowl on the mantelpiece, and the



two sturdy willow-pattern sauce-boats on the dresser. As well, thought Hannah, put a mat under every plate upon the shelves!

Miss Vaughan came back presently with her hands full.

The memorial-card of the sister who married a sea-captain, and whose remains lay in America, was framed with shining black wood. It was very large, and the inscription was surmounted by an embossed urn flanked by two weeping figures. Miss Vaughan displayed it with pride.

"An' I've brought you down one or two more to show you," she said, beaming.

She held them in the left hand, patting them at the edges with her right, as a card-player the pack he is about to deal. One by one she delivered them to Hannah, giving with each a short history of the circumstances that preceded the death it recorded.

A sudden chord of sympathy was struck between the woman and the girl. Hannah was morbidly superstitious. She forgot her contempt of Miss Vaughan's primness. She even forgot her own boa which was allowed to slip away from her shoulders as she listened to the gruesome tales. Her big eyes were fastened on those of the narrator. She thrilled at the account of Rosedew Thomas and the crypt, and asked eager questions.

"What do you think she saw?"

"There is no one can tell us that," said Miss

Vaughan. "Not till Judgement Day, and the dead rise from their graves, will we ever know what passed in the vault under the church."

"And her face was fixed in a grin?" said Hannah. "Was it like as if she was scared to death?"

"They say it would have made your heart stand still to see it," answered Miss Vaughan. "Her teeth all showin' just as she might have died of laughin'. Eh, there's queer things in life."

"And the coffins all moved!" said Hannah. She shuddered, and drew near to the fire.

Miss Vaughan, having found an interested listener, waxed more and more communicative. She turned up the card of Elijah Williams. The account of the nameless illness that baffled medical skill struck a chill into the bones of Hannah. She looked at the little old woman with fascination. There was something that was uncanny in the diminutive form. She felt suddenly as if at any moment a thing that was terrible might come to pass. She had heard of a woman turning into a hare or a strange bird. Such things had been known to happen.

The day was closing in. Outside, the short winter twilight waned. A dog howled in the yard. Rover had followed his mistress to Aberllwyn, and this was his successor bemoaning his new home. Hannah started at the sound.

"It's only Watch," said Miss Vaughan, and turned up the card of David Vaughan.

She began the story of Susan's sudden fear, and

the tapping of the birds upon the panes. Hannah listened, spellbound.

Jane Marton came in to see that the kettle was boiling for tea, and was caught into the same web of superstitious enthrallment. She stood open-mouthed by the hearth, with the teapot in her hand.

"It's worse than corpse-candles," she said.

"I've heard about corpse-candles," said Hannah.

"My mother has seen one," said Jane. "It was the evenin' Jimmy died — that was my little brother who choked of the croup. She was comin' up the road to our cottage, an' it did go bobbin' down the footpath to the churchyard, an' stopped just where they dug his grave whatever. An' she rushed home half dead with fright, an' wondered which of us would be taken, indeed; an' in the night poor little Jimmy was barkin' like an old dog with croup grippin' his throat, an' dead before we could run for the doctor."

"T't, t't, t't," lamented Miss Vaughan; an' if your mother had only laid her down, when she saw the candle comin' to her, she would have known who it was to be."

"Oh!" said Hannah and Jane in a breath.

But at this moment the door opened, and Peter came in. He took a comprehensive glance at the group by the fire, and advanced to shake hands with Hannah as he recognized her. Jane Marton recovered herself, and proceeded to fill the teapot, and Miss Vaughan gathered up her cards, and presently took them from the room.

"I ought to be goin', Mr. Davidson," Hannah said, as he hung up his hat. "I have been payin' Miss Vaughan quite a long visit." She remembered her boa, and pulled it up about her throat.

"It's got so dark, though," she said to herself, "he could hardly see me."

"You'll stop an' have a cup of tea," said Peter hospitably.

It was so long since the monotony of his meals with his cousin had been broken that his tone took a warmth that it had lacked for some time when it addressed Hannah. He felt kindly towards her, indeed, at this moment, and she was quick to notice the change in his manner. She knew not to what to attribute it.

"You're very good," she said. "I don't know but what I will, indeed."

She returned to her chair by the fire and Peter stood with his back to the hearth. A wholesomer atmosphere seemed to have come into the kitchen with his entrance. She was conscious of it, but also of an inclination on her part to revert to a contemplation of the subjects which had been discussed. How might Jane's mother have known which of the family it was whose death was presaged by the sight of the corpse-candle? She would ask Miss Vaughan.

Jane brought in the lamp at this moment, and by the light of it, so Hannah congratulated herself, Peter would see how well she was looking, and how her new boa became her. In the added light, however,

Hannah saw how out of sorts Peter himself looked. There were lines in his face that she had not observed before, and when he was not talking, he seemed pre-occupied. But there could be no doubt that he was more cordial in his manner to her than he had been since the day when she had first suspected that he was thinking of Mary Redwing.

Miss Vaughan returned, and tea was soon ready. The cakes made by the odd little woman could not have been surpassed by those of Clover, and Hannah complimented her hostess upon them.

"They're a deal better than ours at home," she said. "Father's wife's not much of a cook, I don't consider. To my taste, she's got a heavy hand with pastry — if you can call cakes pastry, however. These are beautiful and light, are n't they, Mr. Davidson?"

Peter expressed his approval of them, and Miss Vaughan looked pleased. Hannah saw that she was making a good impression. If she could but win Peter from Mrs. Redwing! More difficult things had been done by women.

"Miss Rees was take great interest in my memorials, Peter," said his cousin; "was you not, Miss Rees?"

"Indeed?" said Peter.

"There's still some who do appreciate them," continued the old woman, "solemn as they may be."

"I shan't sleep much to-night," said Hannah nervously. A recollection of the grisly horrors she had listened to came vividly to her, and she glanced over



her shoulder apprehensively. "How could Mrs. Marton have told, from the corpse-candle, which of them was going to die?" she asked.

"She should have laid her down in the road when she saw the corpse-candle comin'," answered Miss Vaughan, "an' in the flame she would have seen the face of the child that was struck for dead."

Hannah shuddered. "I should n't like to see a corpse-candle," she said uneasily.

## CHAPTER XVII

HANNAH now realized that her walk home, through the lonely fields and over the desolate hills, would be full of terrors. She felt like one who has heard tales of the supernatural too late at night and dreads the moment of exchanging human companionship for the silence of the bedroom. Consequently, having secretly hoped that Peter would offer her his escort on her homeward way, she was now more than ever anxious for it, and she lingered over her leavetaking with Miss Vaughan.

"You'll come again soon, Miss Rees, won't you?" said the old spinster. "We shall always be pleased to see you, indeed; shall not we, Peter?"

She looked at her cousin for his endorsement of her invitation, and he gave it cordially. Hannah turned to him to say good-bye.

"I'll walk a bit of the way with you," he said, taking his hat down from a peg on the wall.

Hannah's relief in not having to face the gathering darkness alone was so great that it allowed her then to experience something of the exultation which under other circumstances the mere fact of his proffered company would have occasioned her. With him beside her, she feared neither corpse-candles nor spectres.

So Peter and Hannah left the house together, and

walked briskly through the cold air. The sun had set, and the shadows of night were already enwrapping the frozen landscape. Overhead the stars began to show as the darkness deepened. Nothing moved. The world, by some mighty and sudden process of petrification, might have been turned to stone, so rigid was it.

The lane dipped, and here, near a shallow pond, now a solid body of ice, the track of cattle was recorded in moulds hard as iron. Hannah felt them through her boots as she stumbled over the uneven ground.

"It was soft weather," Peter said, "before the frost set in, an' in one night every footprint was set as it would stay for weeks. Take care; it's very hard walkin' just here."

He gave her his hand as they crossed the bit of jagged road. Hannah wished there had been more of this marshy ground frozen to dangerousness. She thanked him gently as she released his hand.

"I saw Mrs. Lloyd Morgan in Maen Gorsedd last week," she said presently. "You must miss her very much at Maes Derwen."

"Yes; I miss her very much," said Peter. "Miss Vaughan is very good," he added, after a moment.

Hannah assented. "It was very kind of her askin' me to come again," she said tentatively.

"I hope you will," said Peter.

"I would have come before," said Hannah, encouraged into lowering her voice, "only —"

"Only what?"

"I didn't know as you would care to see me. You never come and see us now at the New Farm, an' we used to see you pretty often. Father sometimes wonders. We have missed you."

Peter was silent for a few moments; then he said something about Clover's wedding, and the changes at Maes Derwen.

"Ah, it was before that!" said Hannah.

But she did not pursue the subject; for, though Peter looked at her kindly, it was not many moments before he talked of other things. She was not, however, ill-satisfied with the words that had been spoken. She knew that a sort of reconciliation had taken place between him and herself, and this was no small thing to have brought about. Having gained so much, who could say what more she might not gain?

"I must turn when I get to the road," said Peter, after he had walked with her for about a mile, and indicating with a nod the highway which led to within a couple of hundred yards of the New Farm. "I should have liked to have gone all the way with you, but I've got to be at home presently to see one of the men."

"I am sure I am very much obliged to you, Mr. Davidson, for comin' so far," said Hannah.

Five minutes later they parted.

As he was saying good-bye, Peter hesitated for a moment as if there was something he would add. Hannah, alert and receptive, and looking forward

with apprehension to the remainder of her walk, loitered, taking a few steps backwards, and ready, at a word from him, to retrace them. There was a brief pause. Then, if Peter had intended to say anything more, he changed his mind, for, with a cordial wave of his hand, he turned about and set his face homewards.

Left alone, Hannah put on a bold front. For a time the thought of the new relations that had established themselves between her and the master of Maes Derwen sustained her. There was nothing to be afraid of, she told herself, and stepped out sturdily. But presently, crowding out the thought of Peter, came with persistence a recollection of the gruesome fate of Rosedew Thomas, of the nameless sickness of Elijah Williams, of the tapping of the birds that presaged the death of David Vaughan, and of the corpse-candle which Jane Marton's mother had seen.

A dead silence brooded over the winter evening. She became aware of the completeness of it. The sound of her own footfall was the only sound she heard. She seemed to be the one living thing abroad. Involuntarily she quickened her pace, and realized that she had done so only in the nearer recurrence of the sound of her steps. Happily, Peter had seen her safely over the hill. It would have been terrible to confront the silent fields alone. She looked askance at the darkness of the hedges. A churchyard adjoined the road at one point, and she held her breath as she passed it. She had not left it many



yards behind her, when a sudden conviction that her fears were prophetic sent her hand to her mouth in a palsied and convulsive movement of terror. She stood still ; and then, with a low cry, started off running as if she were pursued. A horrible idea that even this flight was somehow portentive, insisted upon recognition. Hannah reached home, white, trembling, and out of breath.

Her step-mother paused in her unending work as she saw the girl's face.

"Why, whatever's happened?" she said, putting down the old-fashioned brass tongs she was burnishing, and half rising from her chair. "You look as if you'd seen a skeleton diggin' a grave with a blade-bone for a spittle (spade)."

"Oh!" said Hannah, shuddering. She caught sight of her own scared eyes in a looking-glass that hung on one of the walls as she spoke.

Mrs. Rees was kind at heart, and would have been Hannah's friend if she had been allowed. Something in her step-daughter's aspect now touched her.

"You must be starved with cold," she said gently.

"Yes, I am very cold," said Hannah. She went over to the fire, and held out her hand to the blaze.

"Shall I make you a drop of tea?"

Hannah shook her head. "I had tea with Miss Vaughan," she said. "I have been over at Maes Derwen. I came back halfway by the road—the fields are so lonesome." She knelt down by the fen-

der. "But the road was lonesome, too," she added, with a little shiver.

Mrs. Rees was looking at her curiously. So civil a tone was unusual.

"You 're shu-er you won't have anything?" she asked doubtfully. "A taste of spirit, whatever? I'm afraid, fear you catch cold."

"No; I'll wait till supper, thank you. The road is longer than the fields, an' I am a bit tired. I shall be all right directly."

She fell into silence then. Mrs. Rees, only half satisfied, went on with her work.

After a time, and with an effort of will that was apparent, Hannah rose to her feet, and went to her room to divest herself of her coat and hat and boa. She could not bear, however, to be alone just then, and she hurried back to the kitchen. Here her father found her when he came in a few minutes later.

There must have been something abnormal in her appearance that evening, for, learning that she had been out walking, he asked her playfully whether an "apparition" had met her on the road.

A shudder on the part of his daughter, and a warning look from his wife, advised him that he was venturing on dangerous ground.

## CHAPTER XVIII

THE next day, however, found Hannah in her normal condition. With the return of light she was able to laugh at her fears of the night before, and to dwell with satisfaction upon the renewed friendliness of Peter. The change in his attitude towards her had been unmistakable.

Mrs. Rees, who met her step-daughter in the morning in some curiosity as to the state of her health, was, if her curiosity embraced any anxiety, speedily reassured. The gentleness which had so much surprised her, and for which she had been able to account only by the supposition that the girl was ill, had entirely disappeared, and Hannah's manner had regained its general brusqueness. Nevertheless, the fact remained for Mrs. Rees's speculative digestion, that something unusual had affected her step-daughter on the previous evening ; and even now, under the indifference of voice and aspect, and the customary uncommunicativeness of the short answers, she fancied that she detected some suppressed excitement.

In truth, Hannah was excited. The sight of Peter, and the talk with him, and the walk with him, had rekindled the slumbering fires of her passion. His cordiality, as she thought of it in retrospect, fed the flame. It seemed strange to her that even fear, in all its strength, should have had the power to eclipse

her exultation. She wondered now to what the change in him was due. Inevitably, her conjectures took Mary Redwing within their compass. Could anything have "happened" between Peter and the dress-maker? If something might but happen! It was the old wish; but at this moment Hannah was emboldened to believe that in such an event, Peter would turn to her. His enmity towards her had disappeared. To whom else should he turn? She caught her breath at the thought. Yet, how to touch Mrs. Redwing? She half regretted the open avowal of her hostility towards her, for by it she had shut herself forever out of the cottage under the limes.

While she was musing, there occurred a simple thing which was productive of a result out of all proportion to its own importance.

In days when travelling was slower, and communication with the manufacturing centres more difficult, the periodical visits of "packmen," or pedlars, were events of some moment. Then a brisk trade was done at every halt upon the march. In more recent times, except in outlying districts, the once familiar figures are ever less and less often seen.

On this particular morning, however, one of these merchants of the road came with his wares to the door of the New Farm. Mrs. Rees, despite her strong and inherent instincts of economy, could not resist casting her eye over his goods, albeit with the reiterated warning to him that she did "not mean to buy anything, whatever."

“You can just show me what you’ve got, indeed,” she said. “There’s no harm in that. But do not think you that I want to have anything off you.”

“No; there’s no harm in that,” said the pedlar, proceeding to display his stock-in-trade. “An’ I do not wish you to take so much as a reel of cotton as you haven’t a mind to. Will you please to look at these handkerchiefs? You will not find any as pretty as those in Borderhampton, I know. I’ve had a great sale for them — tremenjeuce! Just feel you how soft an’ fine they was.”

“I don’t want no handkerchiefs,” said Mrs. Rees. “I have more than I could blow my nose on if I was to have colds for a month of Sundays. What are you askin’ for these strainers now?”

Mrs. Rees had a passion for tin. The shining metal attracted her as the light attracts an infant. She could seldom pass the shop of the ironmonger in the neighbouring town without spending some minutes at his window. The farm-kitchen bore evidence of her love for the glittering thing, and every mustard-can that had ever been bought during the reign of the second Mrs. Rees had been stripped of its paper covering, burnished, and put upon the shelves. The very milk-pans stood for ornaments under the dresser when they were not in use.

The “strainers” in question were of two sizes, and their prices, “one an’ five, and one an’ eight,” were pronounced to be “sore” (very) dear!

“An’, besides, I don’t want them,” said Mrs. Rees,



preparing to retreat into the house. "I'd get as good as those at James's, any day of the week, for tenpence or a shillin'."

The pedlar protested. Hannah came to the door. Mrs. Rees appealed to her. Hannah didn't know much about such things, but "expected" the price asked was too much.

"I should only have one," said Mrs. Rees; "an', goodness knows, I don't want that! I would n't think of givin' more than one and two for the little one. An' then I don't know what your father'd say, Hannah."

"I should think we'd kitchen things enough," said Hannah.

"Or else they're always useful," whispered Mrs. Rees, aside to her.

"One an' four," said the pedlar.

"One an' two," said Mrs. Rees.

"One an' four!" repeated the man. "Come, it's worth that, missis! It's a noble utensil, whatever. One an' four; an' I'll throw in one of these novelettes for the young lady! There's beautiful readin' in them. Will you please to choose one, missy?"

Some further bargaining left the pedlar in possession of fifteenpence, Mrs. Rees of the "strainer," and Hannah of an odd number of a weekly journal.

Hannah's meditations upon Peter and Mary and herself, though thus interrupted by the advent of the pedlar, allowed her to give but scant attention to the paper she was holding. So fixed, however, was her inclination to idleness, that even while she could not

devote her thoughts to the story, she nevertheless sat down by the fire, and turned it over absently in her hands. In so doing, she became conscious of a full-page advertisement upon the back of it of Somebody's Cocoa. She had often seen this picture of a barrister in wig and gown drinking with satisfaction from a steaming cup, but now she examined it closely. First it struck her as very well drawn. Her criticism did not take this form. When, however, she said to herself that it was very "natural," and might have been "taken from life," she was expressing her sense of the progress of pictorial advertisement, and her appreciation of this as a good example of its kind. The cup was real — just like one of their best ones in the cupboard in the parlour; and look at the steam! and what a pleasant face the man had! Her judgements were primitive as those of Kitty the farm-servant, who had once based her delight in the artistic merits of a photograph of herself on the fact that the hat was "so like."

What a curious thing a "lawyer's" wig was! What a funny thing to have on one's head! The phrase caught Hannah's attention. Where lately had she heard it, or an analogous phrase?

She drew herself up, and looked abstractedly into the fire, drumming the while with the nail of one of her thumbs upon her white lower teeth. Presently she stopped abruptly.

Peggy, in speaking of the photograph of her father, on the day of her catechism by Hannah, had used

some such words. A funny thing on his head ! Could the child have meant a wig ? Impossible ! Mary Redwing's husband could not have been what Hannah called a "lawyer." It was too improbable. Yet, a funny thing on his head — a thing the little girl could not describe. It was too improbable. Lawyers did not marry women in the position of Mary Redwing.

"Good Lord !"

Hannah jumped to her feet. Again it was a chance phrase of her own which arrested her.

"Lawyers do not marry dressmakers," she said to herself.

In hurried mental survey she went over all she knew of the life of Mary. She remembered dimly her arrival in the village. Mrs. Redwing had worn black (Hannah recollected that for some reason, connected with the fact that the death of her own mother having taken place just before that time, she and her father were then in deep mourning) ; but whether Mrs. Redwing wore weeds or not, she could not tell. It had always been supposed that Mrs. Redwing was a widow. But on what grounds, after all, except those of Mrs. Redwing's own statement ? When she came to think of it, nothing was known of the dressmaker's supposed husband, nor of her life before her sojourn at Maen Gorsedd. It seemed wildly improbable that any flaw existed in her claims to respectability, yet —

A funny thing on his head ! She said the words again and again to herself, and pondered deeply.

Mrs. Rees came in some minutes later, and noted

her step-daughter's attitude. A transitory irritation, caused by the sight of what she termed laziness, lent a sharpness to her voice as she said —

“It's to be hopst you've made your bed, Hannah, for I shan't have time to see to it, nor Kitty neither.”

Hannah did not reply, but absently made a motion of impatience with her head, as if she would not brook interruption; and Mrs. Rees began a sentence with, “Well, if ever —” and went back to the dairy.

Hannah stood for some time longer by the fire. The incident of the thin wedding-ring recurred to her; Mary's account of it; something in her manner on that occasion. . . .

It was unlikely, Hannah told herself; but there was a chance. At least she could satisfy herself upon one point.

She went to her room and hastily dressed herself to go out; then, taking the paper with her, she started for Maen Gorsedd. She ran part of the way. She held the paper tightly, as she would have held a thing that was precious. Her eyes were sparkling with excitement.

“Lawyers don't marry dressmakers. Lawyers don't marry dressmakers.” The words rang in her head like the insistent refrain of a song. She did not think of the cruelty of the hope that possessed her. She saw in it only a possible blow to deal an enemy. All was fair in love and war, she would have told herself, if she had given the matter a thought. She reached the village, and looked about her, seeking Peggy.

She passed the cottage of Mary, but the door was shut, and she did not venture to approach it. She nodded distantly to Andrew Jones at the forge, and proceeded down the uneven street towards the ice. She scanned the faces of the children who were skating or sliding, but the face she sought was not amongst them. Here was Maggy Jones, however, the blacksmith's little daughter. She would doubtless know the whereabouts of her friend. Hannah called the child to her.

Peggy had "gone a message" up to old Mrs. Brecon's, Maggy told her.

"How long ago?"

"An hour."

Then she must be on her way back; and Hannah went to meet her.



## CHAPTER XIX

MARY meanwhile kept more and more to herself. Outwardly, nothing was changed. Only Peter knew, and Peter would be silent. But to Mary herself, everything seemed different. Hitherto she had been able to look people straight in the face; now the knowledge that there was even one person who knew her as she was, made her whole life seem a lie.

Involuntarily she looked on at it with his eyes. In every instance of the confidence which her neighbours placed in her, she saw an act of deception upon her own part. Mrs. Roberts would not have brought her baby, perhaps, if she had known that Mary, who was a mother, had never been a wife. Mrs. James, a poor woman who lived in the village, and had a daughter dying of consumption, would not have wished her to visit the sick girl; and the girl herself, who looked forward so eagerly to the visits, would have turned from her, it might be, had she known.

There were times when Mary wished that they all did know. Then would her life seem more honest. Had the whole thing been a mistake? Would it have been better to have come to Maen Gorsedd concealing nothing, and to have trusted to time and her own innate love of right, to win for her the respect of her fellows?

But Peggy! That the finger of scorn should ever

be pointed at her child, or the covert sneer, or the open taunt meet her, or even that she should be treated with easy-going toleration by the lax, caused the very soul of Mary to shudder. Better far that she should practise her deception than that this should happen. Her deception did no one any harm. It had scarcely even seemed wrong to her till now. But for it, her position might have been that of a certain family dwelling on the outskirts of the village, two of the girls of which had "got into trouble" in service. Nothing more severe in the way of public censure fell to them than that they should be spoken of commonly as "them Hugheses"; but occasionally a parent would exhort a child not to "get too thick" with them, and it was generally understood that good nature stretched a point in their favour in suffering their presence kindly in the community. Would she and Peggy have been alluded to as "them Redwings"?

She could not in her heart believe that the cases were parallel. There was good reason beyond that of the defections of the girls for holding the family in light esteem. The father and the boys were notorious poachers, and on Mondays they were often something more than "market peart." There was a strain of lawlessness in the stock.

But Peter doubtless classed her in the same category with them. Had he not condemned Jenny Brecon?

Mary grew so pale and thin in the few days that

followed the going of Peter, that the truth of the plea of temporary ill health upon which she refused Clover's pressing invitation to her wedding was not to be gainsaid. But Clover, in noticing the silence of her brother, when she told him that Mary was not to be present, could not but guess that something had happened.

Mary did not feel less ill than she appeared. She was sleeping badly, and her appetite failed. She began to look like one whose grasp of life is relaxing. Her cheeks lost something of their roundness, and her eyes spoke of her vigils. If our poet could have seen her just then, he would have found fresh grounds for wondering conjecture.

The neighbours remarked the change in her. Abel Wynne's mother said it was the cold. Some natures could not thrive in such severe weather. She instanced the freezing of the "marrer" in the bones of her own legs.

Mrs. Evans prescribed herb tea. It did her a sight of good when she ailed; and she "always" gave it to the children.

"I make it very hot, Mrs. Redwing, an' just drink it down whatever, an' I seem to feel the benefit in my vitals at once. It's a grand remeddy, an' better than all the doctors' stuff as you was pay shillin's for, indeed."

Mrs. Owen did n't believe much in herb tea. She would not say that it had not its uses. It was safe enough, she admitted that. But give her something

stronger — something with a taste of “meddycine,” so as you really knew you was takin’ physic whatever. Herb tea — well, it was only bitter, or else it was n’t very different from any other tea; an’ you could n’t expect much good from a thing as you could take without winkin’. That was common sense.

Mrs. Pughs thought Mrs. Redwing needed “stimmerlants.” “She ’d better let me send her in a gallon or two of good wholesome stout,” said the landlady of the Cambrian Arms. “She could have it, and welcome. If a body’s not in the habit of takin’ anything, it’s a fine thing to pick you up.”

Andrew Jones and his father exchanged glances. They appeared to have some information in common.

“They say Peter Davidson is not lookin’ so particularly well, neether,” said the father.

“Oh, that’s the way the wind blows, is it?” said Mrs. Pughs.

Mary shook her head at all the remedies that her friends prescribed for her. She knew well enough that the causes of her ailment were not physical. Underlying all else in her heart was the ache for the pain she had caused to Peter. This was keener even than that which she felt for the loss of him to herself. She believed that she did not blame him. She knew herself to be undefiled by the thing which is defiling, but he could not know it, and for a while it was without any bitterness that sometimes she said to

herself in the night, "Ah, he might have known it!" He had left her, and he made no sign of any possible return. Clearly he could not believe in her purity. All the deeper then was the wound which she had inflicted. This was part of her punishment.

The idea of punishment had taken hold of her. With but brief intervals (when, for the preservation of her reason, peace was vouchsafed to her, and fell gently upon her spirit as the tranquillity of night descends upon a burning plain), her brain gave itself no rest. She could no longer live on from day to day in confidence of security as heretofore. She wondered continually what each would hold for her, and whereto the events of her life were tending. The belief that something hung over her got a grip of her. Would it be to-day, or to-day, or to-day, that the blow would fall? Or she felt that she was being pursued, and that already she could hear the footsteps that sooner or later would overtake her. When the fate that was tracking her down seemed to her — as at times it seemed — purely automatic, then was it most terrible of all. To escape was hopeless then. As well try by a futile wringing of the hands to stop the revolution of the wheels of some vast piece of machinery, which an act of ignorance or incaution has set in motion. Mary trembled at these moments.

It was in such a state that, unnerved and unarmed, she was called upon suddenly to confront her enemy. Hannah, alert, cautious, and fully equipped, fresh from hearing Peggy's innocent admissions, and al-



ready elated with expectant triumph, bore down upon her, and took her at a disadvantage. There was no uncertainty in the attack.

Hannah came boldly to the cottage door and knocked. Something in the sharpness of the sound caused Mary to start. It was a moment before she could bring herself to open the door. The sight of Hannah did not reassure her. Hannah's cheeks were flushed, and her eyes shining.

"I won't come in," she said. "What I've got to say can be said here."

She planted her foot in the doorway. The action smote a deadly fear into Mary. This was quickly followed by a numbness out of which she heard Hannah speaking.

"I've come to tell you that I know all about you," Hannah said. "Peggy's father was a gentleman. Never mind how I've found out. Gentlemen don't marry dressmakers, or whatever you were then. You've been cheatin' us finely all these years, but the game's up at last. I know you now for what you are, Mary Redwing — if Redwing's your name at all. How dared you come here settin' up for a honest woman? Would folks have treated you like they have if they'd known what you was? It's lies you've told from first to finish; but there's an end to such things, an' it's come now."

Mary made no attempt to resist the onslaught. What was happening had to happen. Hannah was only an agent in the hands of fate.

"You don't deny it, you see," said Hannah, "because you can't. For shame on you tryin' to trap an upright man into marryin' you!"

Mary rallied for a moment.

"He knows," she said, with white lips. "I refused to marry him, and I told him why."

Hannah's face fell. "He knows?" she said.

She looked at Mary in blank consternation. Half the value of her discovery was gone if Peter already knew.

Mary bowed her head, and leant her forehead on the hand with which she was holding — almost holding on to — the door.

"He'd asked you to marry him?" Hannah said incredulously. "You mean to say Peter Davidson had asked you to be his wife?"

Mary nodded without raising her head. Hannah mused, standing desultorily on the threshold. Peter knew! Why, this, then, was the explanation of his changed attitude towards herself. The thing she was deploring was to her advantage. None the less great need be the satisfaction of disseminating the news of her enemy's shame. She broke into an unpleasant laugh.

"Well, you admit it all," she said, returning to the original charge. "You didn't know I was only guessin', did you?"

She left the cottage then, and Mary, half in stupor, knew that she had gone to spread the thing she had learnt by a trick.

## CHAPTER XX

WHILE Hannah was deliberating how best to noise abroad the discovery she had made, she chanced upon one of "them Hugheses." It was Loo, the elder girl, who, with a jug in one hand, and wiping her mouth with the back of the other, came out of the Cambrian Arms. Two or three men followed her to the door, and she tossed some retort over her shoulder at them. It was received with a roar of laughter. Miss Hughes, who was known amongst them as "Liberty Loo," kicked up her heels by way of comment, and for contrast — of which, with her exuberant sense of humour, she had an instinctive appreciation — she proceeded to walk modestly away. She knew something of London, and there was that which was jaunty even in her demureness. Her dress was a trifle slovenly, but she wore it with an air that was exhilarating, and her skirt swung with a looseness that was suggestive, while it was not indiscreet.

Hannah, who at any other time would have gone out of her way to avoid her, saw in her a means of getting her own dirty work done vicariously; so, having slackened her pace till the young woman was clear of the village, she hurried after her.

Liberty Loo turned round at the sound of footsteps. She had indeed a habit of looking about her, and, if

anything caught her attention, would stand still or walk backwards for as long as it was able to interest her, or till something else attracted her wandering gaze. In this wantonness she was like a kitten which pauses in its play to see what next will move. Hannah Rees was for her the next thing that moved, and, walking sideways across the road, she waited to be overtaken.

"Mornin', miss," she said, catching her skirt, and dropping a mock curtsy. Evidently she had expected Miss Rees to pass her with disdain, but Hannah joined her.

"Good-mornin'," Hannah said, swallowing her inclination to resent the insolent familiarity. "It's a nice day."

"Tremenjuce cold whatever," said Liberty Loo, with a change of tone and manner; "but grand for walkin'. You're goin' up home to the New Farm, I expect?"

"Yes," said Hannah. "I shall just be back in time for dinner. We go part of the way together, don't we?"

"That's as you like, miss," said Loo. She did not know how to interpret Hannah's condescension. She looked at her inquisitively.

Hannah, hoping that her companionship with Loo Hughes would escape notice, talked affably to her for the few hundred yards for which their roads were the same. At the point of parting she said—

"Is n't this dreadful about Mrs. Redwing?"

"Mrs. Redwing?"

Hannah smiled mysteriously.

"Indeed, I don't know yet what else to call her."

"Eh!" cried Liberty Loo.

"She's no right to be 'Mrs.,' anyway," said Hannah. "The Redwing — well, I don't know; that may be her name."

Loo searched her companion's face.

"You don't mean —"

Hannah nodded.

"But her," said Loo — "*her*, of all people!"

"It's true, though."

"Then Peggy's a love-child!"

"No better."

The breath of Miss Hughes seemed for a moment to have been taken away. Then she plied Hannah with eager questions.

"Had n't you heard anything?" said Hannah. "There's been rumours, an' now she's admitted it herself. Peggy's father was a lawyer, or a judge, or something. Anyway, he was a gentleman, an' he never married her. Fancy her here all these years, and no one ever knowin' till now!"

"Poor thing!" said Liberty Loo, with a momentary instinct of pity. But the satisfaction of learning that Mary Redwing, who had been so universally esteemed, was not "any better" than herself, was too great to admit of lengthy compassion.

"She'd never have taken my Willy in to mind for me, if I'd ever have given her the chance," she said,



half aloud. "We was none of us good enough for her in father's house."

"It's been unfair on you," said Hannah, "as I daresay was n't near as much to blame. Isn't it a shame as a thing's visited on one, an' another gets off without any punishment? She seemed such a good woman, too, an' people trustin' their children to her! It does seem strange her gettin' work all the time, an' Jenny Brecon turned off."

Hannah paused to allow her words to soak in.

"Jenny Brecon was a little silly to drown herself, though," said Loo Hughes philosophically. "When I had my trouble, father said, 'Well, there's no remedy'; an' no more there is n't, so what's the good o' vexin'. But Mrs. Redwing! Well, that beats all!"

A few minutes later, Hannah left her and went her way. She had no doubt that before evening the news would be all over the village. She said nothing about it herself when she got home, but waited in suppressed excitement for tidings. She did not wish to be identified with the discovery, and she flattered herself that she had been sufficiently vague, in the communication she had made to Loo Hughes, to ensure for the story an uncertainty as to its source. The poacher's daughter would naturally mention the name of her informant, but since Hannah had implied that the thing was common property, and since the tale would pass through numberless mouths, it was not probable that there would be any difficulty in refuting responsibility for it.

For the propagation of that which stood just then to Hannah for gospel, she could have chosen no more efficient agent than Loo Hughes. Before the sun had set, every one in Maen Gorsedd knew the thing which Mary Redwing had been keeping to herself. At first, many who heard it indignantly denied the possibility of the truth of it. Mrs. Pughs of the Cambrian Arms told Loo to leave the house for a bold girl.

"It's not true, not one word of it, an' that you very well know. A decenter woman than Mrs. Redwing never breathed, I'll lay. There's them, indeed, as had better pass their time thinkin' of their own trippin's than be tryin' to throw mud at their neighbours as have never had but a kind word for them. For shame to you, Loo Hughes. But it's only as was to be expected. I've let you be too free about my bar—in an' out mornin', noon, an' night—"

"An' if you have," said Liberty Loo, with unruffled good humour, "I've brought you custom. I can fill the place any day of the week for the toss of my head; can't I, chaps?"

The men who were present laughed.

"Don't you give me none o' your sauce," cried Mrs. Pughs, her face the colour of the crimson claret-glasses that shone upon a shelf, "or I'll have the law in to you. I'm not goin' to have my house made a sink for shameful gossip as there isn't a word of truth in."

"Hear, hear!" said two or three men.

"You'll see," said Liberty Loo, gathering up her skirts (though the day was as dry as a bone), and hitching her hat to one side. "You will see what's true, before we're many hours older. Good-day to you, Mrs. Pughs. I-won't ask any of these gentlemen to come over with me to the Dragon, because I have a great respect for you. I think you're a worthy woman, Mrs. Pughs ; I do, indeed. But" — she paused at the door — "if I did ask 'em whatever, they'd follow me to a man, would n't you, boys?"

She whisked herself with a caper through the swing doors. Mrs. Pughs fumed for a time, and, in her championship of Mary, called Miss Hughes certain homely and definite names, which it is not my strict duty to record.

"Oh, she's none so bad," said Andrew Jones ; "she 's just Liberty Loo, as you may say ; an' a bit loose with her tongue, p'r'aps."

"An' more than her tongue," said Mrs. Pughs, "if all I hear 's true."

Into the immediate discussion of which it behooves us not to enter. The talk came round of a sudden to Mary Redwing, with the entrance of Abel Wynne. He brought strange tidings. Mrs. Owen of the Lane had knocked at Mrs. Redwing's door and had been refused admission.

"There's some mistake," Mrs. Pughs maintained stoutly. "I'll not believe a word of the story till Mrs. Redwing confirms it herself."

But the whole village was talking of it. Notwith-

standing the cold, groups hung about gates and doorways. Incredulity was at first to be read upon most of the faces. Here and there, perhaps, was one on which might be detected the significant look of intelligence which we wear when, having held that the flesh is weak, we find that our neighbours are as frail as ourselves. On the whole, however, the refusal of Mary to open her door to Mrs. Owen, since the incident, seemed to imply a tacit admission of guilt; made an impression which was profound.

Finally, when rumour, instead of dying down, rather gained in strength, Mrs. Pughs, though the taproom was full, and business therefore brisk, bidding Annie cope with it as best she could, put on her bonnet and shawl, and went out by the back way. She avoided the people who stood about the village street, and, ignoring the rebuff with which Mrs. Owen had met, she made in the dusk for the cottage under the limes, and knocked. She was seen, nevertheless, as she stood at Mary's door. Two or three women looked on from a distance.

"It's Mrs. Roberts, I believe," said one.

"Indeed, I think it's Mrs. Effance," said another.

"It's more like Mrs. Pughs," said a third; "an' I thought I saw her go by whatever, too."

There was, meanwhile, no answer to the good lady's knock. She knocked again.

"Open the door, dear," she said coaxingly; "open it, there's a good woman. It's me — Mrs. Pughs. It's a friend, as don't think evil of you, an' as only

wants the word from you to give them all the lie.  
Open the door, dearie."

Then the women who watched saw that the door  
was opened.



## CHAPTER XXI

NO one but Hannah Rees knew exactly how the secret of Mary Redwing became known. Loo Hughes commonly got the credit — or the discredit — of the discovery, and good Mrs. Pughs, even after she had had confirmation of the story from Mary's own lips, never liked the girl again.

She said that to go peerin' and pryin' into the lives of folk as, no matter what they 'd done, was angels by comparison, was all of a piece with what was known and what was to be expected of them Hugheses.

The door of Mary's cottage remained shut for the rest of that day — the last of the week. On the following morning Peggy was absent from the Sunday School, nor did she or her mother appear at church. People hung about the porch and loitered in the churchyard. Country-folk from outlying farms carried back the strange news to their homes. Mary, from her windows, which commanded Salem Chapel, must have seen the unusual stir amongst the Dissenters as they came out after their service, and if any sign was needed to tell her of the subject of discussion, the frequent glances in the direction of her cottage were more than enough to have enlightened her.

The hour of the midday meal cleared the village

street. Then the place assumed the look of inactivity that characterized its normal afternoon. By and by, neatly dressed children issued from doorways and started for their usual walks. Some ran towards Maen Gorsedd pond. Girls met their lovers. A few youths lounged here and there. Mrs. Wynne opened her door, and looked shiveringly up and down the street. Nothing moved over at Mary's. The old woman shook her head as she returned to her place by the fire.

From the Castle, whither the news had been taken back in the carriage after church, came one of the grooms with some letters for the post. Before starting for Maen Gorsedd, he had been given special injunctions on behalf of the stables, the servants' hall, and, indirectly, the drawing-room (where Lady Llandrindod was in a little flutter of excitement over the extraordinary discernment of her poet), not to return from the village without further information. He called, therefore, on the Joneses of the forge, and dropped in on Mrs. Pughs, besides extending his homeward walk by a few yards to pass Mrs. Redwing's cottage, in answer to an instinct akin to that which takes crowds to the scene of a murder or other disaster.

Nevertheless, the reports which he carried back to the Castle were sufficiently meagre. Very little was known beyond the bald fact that Mrs. Redwing had never been married.

All that day Mary's cottage wore the look of desertion which settles down upon a house that is un-

tenanted. At dusk, however, streaks of light showed at the edges of the blinds. Mrs. Owen, who supplied most of the village with milk from her small dairy, having waited in vain for Mary or Peggy to fetch the usual quota, sent it at length by her daughter Lucy, instructing her to knock at Mrs. Redwing's door, and deposit the little can beside it with a message. The child was made to repeat the words many times before she was allowed to proceed upon her errand.

She came back with the report that in answer to her knock the voice of Mrs. Redwing had asked, "Who's there?" and that upon hearing the message, Mrs. Redwing had come to the door, and taken the can from her. "An' I was to thank you for your kindness," said Lucy.

"Oh, it was not much in the way of kindness," said Mrs. Owen. "But how did she seem?"

"Indeed, I did not look," said Lucy.

In Maen Gorsedd, on that Sunday, little else but the subject of Mary was talked of. Conjecture was active as to what was passing behind the curtained windows and the fast-closed door. Up at the New Farm, Hannah, with bright eyes, asked Kitty a dozen times to tell her what she had heard after chapel. She was even civil to her step-mother for a time, but fell foul of her when Mrs. Rees said that there might be excuses for Mary, if all was known.

"I don't know what excuses there can be for deceivin' everybody," said Hannah. "That's where I think she's behaved so bad. Us all treatin' her as if

she was a respectable woman, and her knowin' all the time as she was n't fit to associate with us. Look at Loo Hughes. I don't wonder she feels she's been treated unfair."

"You can't compare Mrs. Redwing with them Hughes girls," said Mrs. Rees brusquely.

"Well, I don't know," said Hannah, firing up. "One's behaved open an' aboveboard, an' has never made no pretences to be any better than she was, an' the other's been church-goin' an' settin' up for an honest woman. It's sick'nin', I call it, an' she's been nothin' more than a snake in the grass. You can go an' be friends with her if you like, an' I dare-say will, as you don't seem to be too particular; but all I can say is as my own mother would n't have liked me to hobnob with women as have disgraced themselves."

"I would n't dig up my mother if it was only to give her the credit of my own uncharitableness," said Mrs. Rees.

Clover Morgan heard the news in the course of the day over at Aberllwyn. "It can't be true," she said; "it can't be true!"

A few minutes later, Lloyd was struck by something in her expression. She turned her strange eyes upon him in answer to his question. She shook her head. There was nothing the matter, she declared. But, in truth, she was living again through the day of Jenny Brecon's death.

At Maes Derwen nothing was heard of what had

passed at Maen Gorsedd till the following morning. Peter attended Derwen Church in the forenoon, and after dinner he took one of his long and solitary walks, in the course of which it chanced that he encountered no one to inform him of the topic that was in every one's mouth. Mary at this time was never out of his thoughts. He had ceased now to ask himself whether it was possible that he still loved her. It was vain to ask a question to which the cry of his whole being was an irrefutable answer. He loved her ten times more than at first. He endowed the real Mary still with some of the attributes of the ideal. The loss of the woman he had thought to gain (for he deemed the gulf which separated her from him impassable) made her memory tenfold precious to him ; and what stood for the symbol of her unless the true and frail Mary? Mary thus represented to him yet the ideal woman he had worshipped. In thinking of her in this light, he became accustomed insensibly and by degrees to the knowledge which had so terribly shocked him. Nevertheless, he kept away from Maen Gorsedd. He dared not trust his eyes to look upon her. He hungered for her as starving men for bread. He lay awake at night thinking of her. He took his lonely walks, choosing always a direction which would preclude the possibility of meeting her, and looked out for her down every lane and turning, across every field. His face had lost some of its healthy ruddiness. He looked gaunt in these winter days, and was moody and silent, though he tried to show an inter-



est in the conversation of his cousin. When he appeared to be listening to her, a truthful answer to a sudden challenge of his thoughts would have been "Mary." But if he thought of her, and longed for her, he did not forgive her sin. He still believed that such a sin was unpardonable in woman. Mary had told him a naked fact. With a pride that was noble in its way, she had sought neither to palliate nor explain, and Peter had asked no question.

The news from Maen Gorsedd reached him on the Monday morning. Old Mrs. Brecon, who had clear intervals, came up to the farm with fixed purpose. It was as if she had feared that clouds would descend upon her poor brain before she delivered her message. She hurried along the frozen road, and did not stop to take her breath till she stood at the farm door. Miss Vaughan opened to her.

"I want to see Mr. Davidson," she said.

Peter was at his breakfast, and came forward as he heard his name.

"Come in, Mrs. Brecon," he said kindly.

The old woman shook her head.

"I had a visit from Loo Hughes yesterday," she said, "an' she told me something as I'm goin' to tell you, so as you may have a chance of drivin' another good woman to her grave. Mrs. Redwing's a good woman. She offered my Jenny work when you drove her from your door. Well, it's come to light now that Mrs. Redwing, as has lived a blameless life in Maen Gorsedd, so that every one respects her, an'

loves her, though she has a daughter, has never been a wife. There's your chance, Peter Davidson. Go down an' tell her she's a foul woman. Go an' tell her as not all her goodness an' her gentleness an' her kindness is worth a rap to set off against her sin. Go an' throw your stone, Peter Davidson, an' wonder as God Almighty don't strike you dead for takin' upon you to judge!"

## CHAPTER XXII

WHEN Hannah Rees left Mary's cottage after throwing therein the shell which had exploded with such effect, Mary walked over to the fireplace with uncertain steps. She could not be said to be feeling anything just then. She was like one who has been wounded in battle, and is surprised not to find himself in pain. That presently the wound would ache, she knew dimly. The knowledge pierced the stupor in which her mind was enwrapped, and she sat down while she waited. She lost all count and sense of time. It might have been in five minutes, it might have been in an hour, that the latch was raised with a click that sounded to Mary as if it came to her ears across vast spaces and that yet was very loud, and Peggy came in.

Mary contemplated her with dazed eyes, and as she looked, she saw the child stricken at the sight of her with sudden fear. A sharp and tremulous cry escaped the little girl's lips, and, with a convulsive movement of terror, she stood still in the middle of the room. A strange moment passed. Mary recovered her self-possession.

"Peggy!" she said. "Peggy!"

She opened her arms, and the child, seeing the unfamiliar face change into the face she loved so

well, ran to her with another and a different cry, and hid her face upon her mother's breast.

Mary strained her to her heart.

"What was it, my darlin'? Did I frighten you? My little girl! There, don't cry. Tell me, what was it? What was it, Peggy?"

Peggy drew the closer to her, sobbing.

It was some moments before she was able to speak.

"I did n't know it was you," she said, with catching breath.

"Did n't know it was mother?"

"You did look so strange, an' — an' — an' — oh, but it is you —"

"Yes, it's me, darlin'; me, your mother, my darlin', as they can never part from you. Oh, Peggy, Peggy, Peggy!"

The pain she had been awaiting had come. The wound was aching fiercely. She knew now the extent of the thing that had happened to her, and yet, after the bewildering numbness, — the outward expression of which had been so terrible that it had transformed her in the eyes of her child into a thing unknown and fearful, — any conscious sensation was grateful. Tears, moreover, came to assuage the poignancy of her anguish. For many minutes she could find no voice in which to tell the child the cause of this uncontrollable manifestation of grief.

Peggy began to cry afresh. Her nerves, though she had never heard of their existence, were still in tumult. The panic into which they had been thrown

by the shock she had experienced, had left them tingling and disordered. She now felt mistily that there was cause for the sudden fear which had attacked her. Something dreadful had happened. She had never before seen her mother in this state. Her fear was renewed. The sensations that crowded into the next few moments were manifold, and, unable to understand them, the little girl sobbed aloud in her amazement and misery.

Once more Mary realized that all unwittingly she was terrifying the child. She made a supreme effort, and gained some degree of self-control.

"We mustn't go on like this," she said gravely. "It's very wrong of mother to have given way. She ought to know better than to frighten her little girl so. Now stop cryin', darlin'. Dry your eyes. Look, mother's not cryin' any more. Hush, my pet, hush! I want to talk to you, and I can't if my little girl goes on cryin'. Look, it's nearly dinner-time. We'll go and bathe our eyes, and then you shall help me lay the table, and we won't think of what's been troublin' mother till afterwards. There's my good little girl."

Thus Mary drew the child's attention, and with it her own, to the common things of life. She spread the cloth as if nothing had happened to disturb the even course of every day. She placed upon it the two plates with the blue rims, beside each a knife and a tumbler. From the pump at the back of the house Peggy fetched a jug of water, and from the



cupboard Mary a loaf and a piece of cheese. Then, while Peggy made a fair meal, she pretended to eat.

The hysterics to which she had seen that the late expression of feeling was infectiously tending, were averted, and when the time came for speaking to the child, she found herself calm. She waited till she had washed up and put away the things that had been used, and then she called Peggy to her.

"I have something to tell you," she said. "Come and sit beside me here by the fire. It is something very sad, which I should have liked to have kept from you always. I should have liked to have spared you, my precious, but it's better that I should tell you than any one else should. You won't understand it, darlin', till you're older. Have you ever wondered about your father, Peggy?"

Peggy shook her head. Mary pondered for a moment or two how best to explain the story she had to tell. In the meantime, Peggy was thinking also.

"Only about the funny thing on his head," she said presently.

Mary looked at her absently. Peggy's eyes were very round and solemn.

"The funny thing on his head?"

"In the picture; in the picture I once saw in the drawer you keep locked — the picture you said was father. Don't you remember, mother? You was at the drawer; oh, it's a long time ago, years an' years, an' I saw the picture, an' you said it was father, an'

I asked you what it was on his head, an' you would n't tell me."

Mary recalled the incident.

"Miss Rees showed me another picture," said Peggy, "an' asked me if the thing on the man's head was like on father's."

"Miss Rees?"

"It was on a paper, an' she met me on the road, an' showed it to me."

"When?"

"To-day. Jes' before I came in."

Mary considered the child in wonder. Here was a clue to the means by which Hannah had made her discovery.

"How did she know about the photograph of your father?"

"She asked me one day if I remembered him, an' a heap of things, an' I said about the photograph."

A few questions cleared up what mystery there was.

"I did n't know I ought n't to have told."

"No, you did n't know," said Mary, and fell into silence.

How simple it was! A few chance statements on the part of an innocent child, and the secret which had been kept for so many years was common property.

"Are you angry, mother?"

The silence had lasted for some moments then.

"No, darlin', you did n't know."

Mary's throat moved. It was with difficulty that she kept the tears back from her eyes. The simplicity of the explanation of Hannah's possession of the information with which she had blasted the life of Mary, made her case and the case of Peggy seem, for a time, the more piteous. Mary felt that she might so easily have guarded against attack in such a quarter. One of the tears she was keeping back forced its way over the brim and trickled down her face. Peggy saw it, and her hand stole into her mother's. It was held there and pressed to the throbbing bosom which had known the joys of motherhood at the cost of so much pain. Presently Peggy's arms were round her neck, and her head on the gentle breast, and her mother's arms were round her, and her mother's face buried in the soft and sunny hair. Thus the two wept together for a while, Peggy weeping because her mother wept.

It was now that there came the knock of Mrs. Owen. Mary unclasped her arms from Peggy, and Peggy's from herself. She went to the door, but, instead of opening it, she slipped the bolt as silently as she could.

"I can't see any one," she said.

"Oh, it's me, indeed," came the answer; "it's me—Mrs. Owen whateffer. I want to see you bad, Mrs. Redwing. Just one little minute."

"I can't see any one," said Mary again.

The latch was lifted vainly. Then retreating foot-

steps, followed by silence, showed that Mrs. Owen had accepted her repulse.

The interruption, however, served to enable Mary once more to calm herself. She returned to Peggy, and then she told her story.

What could Peggy understand of it? She connected her mother's unhappiness with the fact that her father had been a gentleman. What could she be expected to understand of the relations that had existed between her parents? It was in vain that her mother tried to explain to her the wrong that had been done, and the shame which must of necessity attach to an innocent life. What could she understand of the social differences which had made marriage impossible, though love seemed supreme? What could she have understood (had Mary even told her) of the ardent reasoning of a lover who thought he loved, of his passionate pleading, of his hot vows, of a sacrifice which had been made to seem beautiful and noble, and of the making of which she, Peggy, the love-child, was the visible symbol? What could she understand of the lover's mistaking of desire for devotion, of the gradual cooling of his passion, of the shattering of the woman's ideal, and the pain unspeakable of her isolation and shame? Death Peggy had heard of, and her father was dead.

Thus much she understood; her father was a gentleman, her father was dead.

Her mother said that she would be shunned by children with whom she had been friends; that, now

that the truth was known, her mother herself would be treated with coldness or insult. This she could not understand, and, as if to disprove it in part at least, there came later in the afternoon the knock of Mrs. Pughs, and her refusal to take a refusal. When at length Mrs. Pughs was admitted, Peggy was sent into the bedroom as on a night which she remembered, but not before she had seen the good woman draw her mother's face towards her and kiss her brow. The day that followed was a strange day. As we know, neither Peggy nor Mary stirred abroad. Peggy was told not to stand at the windows, but otherwise (after she had repeated the collect she had learnt for the Sunday School, which she was missing) she was allowed to do as she liked, and she amused herself quietly with her dolls, casting from time to time a glance in the direction of her mother.

Mary, to her own wonder, had slept well. For the first time for many nights her slumbers had neither been long delayed nor broken by harassing dreams. Her mind felt clear and active. She spent the day in thought, speaking little, and, though it might have surprised her to hear it, looking happier than she had looked of late. The apprehensive element had left those thoughts that expressed themselves in her eyes. She had more the appearance that characterized her looks when first we made her acquaintance. She was pale, but her lips had colour.

She held herself uprightly, and seemed to have recovered something of her former strength.



The larder had suffered from the fact that Mary had not been out on the previous day for such shopping as it was her habit to do at the end of each week. Consequently the usual small joint was not forthcoming, and she made shift for dinner with eggs and bacon, while in lieu of the pudding for which she found herself without materials, she gave Peggy some bread and jam. The last of the milk had been used at breakfast, and at tea it would be necessary to do without any. That, thanks to Mrs. Owen, no such necessity arose we know already.

This small sign of kindly feeling made Mary pause before a decision to which her thoughts had been tending all day. She had been touched not a little by the visit of Mrs. Pughs on the previous afternoon, and by her loving sympathy. The coming, too, of Mrs. Owen, although Mary had refused to admit her, had not been without its effect, and this further proof of good-will — possibly, dare she think it? of unshaken faith — was a thing almost to renew hope for the future. Nevertheless, two people only, out of all who knew her, had evinced pity for her in her trouble. She hardly took into account the result upon her neighbours of her refusal to see the first of them who had gone to her door. That Mrs. Owen herself did not resent the rebuff which met her advances, was testimony to the magnanimity of the good woman, and a certain delicacy had its part in the reasons that kept Mary's friends from her during that Saturday and Sunday. In point of fact, it was a relief to her

that no one came. She wished, as they had all divined, to be alone. But would it be possible for her, after their silence, to continue to live amongst them?

She heard the bells of the church begin to ring for evening service, and the solitary bell of the chapel which summoned its congregation insistently and with a peremptoriness which was irritating. When the sounds ceased, silence fell once more upon the village.

Peggy had long since tired of her dolls, and was sitting by the fire with a book which represented and rewarded the fact that she had not missed a single class at the Sunday School in the preceding half-year. She had been reading quietly for some minutes, when she looked up suddenly.

“I shan’t get one this time,” she said.

Mary turned her eyes slowly in the direction of her little girl. She saw at this moment that Peggy wore her best frock. From sheer habit, she herself must have put it out for the child that morning. It was plum-coloured, and had a narrow stripe of black velvet round the skirt. She remembered the purchase of the stuff and of the ribbon one day in the summer in Borderhampton. In this garment Peggy looked amazingly pretty. Mary noted her beauty with a momentary dismay. The little girl had the beauty which, it is asserted, is often the fatal attribute of the ill-begotten—if that which owes its being to ungovernable and reciprocal passion can be called less well-begotten than that which comes perhaps of tame ex-

pediency. Mary's dismay turned to pride. At such moments she asked herself whether in truth she was at all repentant.

"One what, dear?"

"A prize. I've missed my Sunday School."

Mary's thoughts were wool-gathering, and it was some seconds before she could collect them sufficiently to direct their attention to what Peggy was trying to tell her.

"It won't make any difference, darlin'," she said at last. "You won't be here next prize-day."

"Won't be here?"

"No, dear. We're goin' away from Maen Gorsedd."

"Goin' away?" said Peggy. Her eyes became enormous.

"Yes, dear."

"Where to?"

"I don't know, darlin'. London, perhaps. Yes — London. London is very big."

## CHAPTER XXIII

BUT Mrs. Owen went upon a pilgrimage.

"To show there's no difference," she said to Mrs. Evans, when she had explained her mission.

"Just so," said Mrs. Evans. "An' I'm sure I'm very thankful to you for puttin' it into my head; an' so'll Mrs. Roberts be, you'll see! She's a good-sorted woman, an' always ready to do anybody a kindness. Oh, an' as to kindness, we should all be behavin' bad, indeed, if we was to let Mrs. Redwing belief as we was not be friendly with her any more. O—oh! Let her done what she may, her's a tidy soul as no one could think foul of. When we come to reckonin'—Judgement Day—I daresay there's many a wife among us with lines an' all as'd be glad to change places with her. Good-night, then, Mrs. Owen. I wish I could run up to Mrs. Roberts for you. O—oh, I would, an' welcome, but my man don't like me leave him Sunday night."

"No; you stop where you are," said Mrs. Owen; "an' don't go against the wishes of your husband, Mrs. Effance. The duty of the wives is to the husbands, an' I shall get to Mrs. Roberts's in no time, an' thank you. I'm a tremenjeuce smart walker."

"I don't know but what I spoil him," said Mrs. Evans; "but he's a curly little chap" (short-tempered); "an', indeed, it's as much for the sake of peace

I humour him as anything. Good-night, Mrs. Owen. I hope you're well wrapped up whateffer, for it's a night to starve a body."

"Oh, I'll do sweetly, an' the cold can't grip me if I walk sharp. Good-night, Mrs. Effance."

She nodded a farewell, and went her way. When she reached the little farm that belonged to the Roberts, she found only Mr. Roberts within. A relation of his wife's had come from Chester to stay for a few days, and had persuaded Mrs. Roberts—contrary to that lady's custom, as her husband testily explained—to accompany her to chapel. Mr. Roberts had been told to look after the baby during the absence of its mother, and he was doing so with a pipe in his mouth and much grumbling.

"Why could n't she sit at home a night like this? Cold! It's enough to freeze a boilin' kettle! Ay, this winter is a villain. By the livin', it's a foul winter. I am sorry you've had your walk up here for nothin', Mrs. Owen. But won't you sit you down an' wait a little minute, an' perhaps she'll be in presently."

"If she's gone to chapel, Mr. Roberts, she won't be back just yet awhile. I'm afraid I cannot stop; an' I'm sorry, for I did want to see her too."

"Can't I give a message for you? I am very vexed as she should not be in when you've had all the trouble to come up here. It's her cousin Betty Lewis's fault. She'd no call to go to chapel this evenin'. It was different when we lived down in Maen Gorsedd; then we went to chapel mornin' an' even-



in' ; but up here, why, I reckon the Lord 'll take into account the extra mile ! But Betty Lewis was set on goin', an' Kate-Anna would n't hear of her goin' alone. Betty Lewis was better have stopped at Chester. She said she could n't be guided in a matter o' religion by any man. She's a bit too big-sorted to please me."

"Perhaps, as she was a guest, Mrs. Roberts had to gratify her. It was just manners, perhaps," returned Mrs. Owen, who was a peacemaker by temperament.

"Manners or no manners, it was poor respect to me!" said Mr. Roberts. "But I've no right, indeed, to bother you with a little bit of wilfulness as there was no harm in, an' as I ought to be above makin' such a fuss of. Kate-Anna's a good wife to me, if she did vex me for once. Baby grows ; don't he, Mrs. Owen?" His face broke into a smile.

"He's a right tidy boy," said Mrs. Owen, her smile responding to his.

"He's got another tooth," said the farmer, "an' it's made him fretful, like his father. Do sit down, Mrs. Owen."

"Oh, I can't stop, Mr. Roberts, thank you. I'll just tell you what I came for, an' then I must be gettin' me back. It's about Mrs. Redwing."

"There was a queer bit o' news for us all!" exclaimed Mr. Roberts. "I'd as soon o' thought bad of Kate-Anna. I'd as soon o' believed as I was n't the father of John-Samuel here, I would."

"Ah, we must n't think bad of Mrs. Redwing. I

do feel so sorry for that poor woman. After knowin' her all these years, we can't think any different of her for a thing as happened all that while ago. Has n't her life here been an example to us all? When I think of my Lucy an' my Molly, I — I know what she must have suffered."

There was a silence for a moment or two. Mr. Roberts knocked the ashes out of his pipe.

"I thought perhaps Mrs. Roberts would leave baby with her to-morrow as ordinerry," said Mrs. Owen, after the pause, and scanning his face, "if she was goin' into market whateffer? It'd be a sort of sign to her as we did not want to visit her trouble upon her. I've just been to Mrs. Effance, an' she was not goin' into town; but she just means to take Johnny down to Mrs. Redwing's, an' ask her to mind him for a bit, as if she was; an' I'm goin' to take my baby, too; and I thought if Mrs. Roberts—"

Thus it came to pass that on the following morning three women presented themselves severally at Mary's door.

Mrs. Owen, with her market-basket and her big baby, was the first to appear. She composed herself as best she could, and knocked boldly, but her heart was beating loudly. She hoped that her voice would not tremble nor fail her, and, as she waited, she cleared her throat nervously.

The door was opened.

"Good-mornin', Mrs. Redwing," she said. "I don't like to trouble you, but would you please to mind

baby for me to-day? It'd be a great kindness to me if you would; for I've got more butter than usual to take into town, an' what with the cold, an' one thing or another, I don't rightly know how I could carry her, an' Lucy's got to be out all the afternoon."

Mary looked at her in surprise. Mrs. Owen began to speak again rapidly.

"She gets heavier every day, I believe, an' I expect she'll be able to walk before very long. May I leave her with you? An' would you please to put just a taste of hot water in her bottle, to take the chill off the milk? I filled it up before I started. Everything gets so cold this weather. Go to Mrs. Redwing, there's a good child. Mother'll be back before very long. I daresay I shall be here again by three or half-past, Mrs. Redwing. There's never much doin' these winter days. I hope you're pretty well, Mrs. Redwing. An' can I do anything for you in town? No? Well, you won't forget the drain of hot water in her milk. It soothes it to the coats of the stomach."

Thus, giving Mary no opportunity to speak, Mrs. Owen accomplished her purpose, and hurried away.

Mechanically Mary carried the child into the house. She put it into the cradle, and then stood looking at it absently. Peggy, who had been standing behind her mother at the door, knelt down beside the cradle and began to rock it. The wickerwork creaked.

"She's laughin'; look, mother!"

Mary did not respond. Another knock roused her

from her reverie. It was Mrs. Roberts, who was going into Borderhampton to market, and to show the place to her cousin, Miss Lewis, who was staying with her on a visit. And would Mrs. Redwing look after John-Samuel for her? Mrs. Roberts hoped he would n't be troublesome. Miss Lewis came from Chester. It was so nice to have a change to the country sometimes. It was very cold — enough to starve you ; but it was clean for walkin'. And how was Mrs. Redwing ?

John-Samuel held out his arms to Mary.

"You see he wants to go to you. I belief you spoil him, Mrs. Redwing. May he stop with you while we're away? That's right. Thank you very much, Mrs. Redwing. I'm sure I'm very grateful. Good-day, then, Mrs. Redwing."

Mrs. Roberts was moving away ; her cousin was in front of her. Mrs. Roberts looked back and hesitated ; then she returned suddenly to Mary, and caught her hand.

"My dear, my dear!" she said, and hurried after her cousin.

Mary turned blindly into the house. She put the child down beside Peggy, and she went to her room. She sobbed once or twice, and she pressed the back of her hand to her eyes. But it was not unhappiness that made her cry.

A day of surprises was before her. Mrs. Evans brought Johnny. She did not succeed in making it very plain why, since, as she let out inadvertently,

she was not going into Borderhampton ; but there he was, and Mary's heart swelled with gratitude.

Mr. Alison, the Rector of Maen Gorsedd, came to the cottage in the course of the morning. He was an old man, a widower, and of few words. With tact and sympathy he elicited from Mary the main facts of her story. When he had heard all, he said little. He forbore to speak just then of penitence. To repent a sin was to wish it undone. Could Mary the mother do this? Nor did he speak of the Magdalen. The matter must rest between God who gave the law and the woman who broke it. His gentleness caused Mary's tears to flow.

"I have n't deserved such kindness," she said. She spoke, nevertheless, of her intention of leaving Maen Gorsedd.

"Do nothing in haste," he said gravely. Then, as he rose to take leave of her, he put out his hand. "For eight years," he said, "you have had our confidence ; don't pay us the bad compliment of refusing to believe that we can still put faith in you."

"But Peggy —"

"Would you begin elsewhere all over again?"

"Ah," said Mary, "that's it." She hid her face.

"Be advised by me. God has dealt mercifully with you, has n't he, Mrs. Redwing?"

Mary nodded.

"Well, I think there is mercy, *too*, with man. Already you have had some proof" — he paused and looked at the children — "that people here retain



their trust in you. Think it over, Mrs. Redwing. And one thing more. Don't shut yourself and your daughter up. Oh, I know what you must feel about this. You wish to keep out of sight. You wish to avoid notice. Don't shut the door on your friends. Don't hurt them, when they wish to be kind. Above all things, beware of pride. You don't know how sensitive kindness may be —"

"Mrs. Owen did not resent my not seein' her — you mean my not seein' her when she called on Saturday, sir, don't you? I was dreadfully upset just then, an' I scarcely knew what I was about when I bolted the door against her. But she was n't angry with me, sir. She sent Lucy to me with some milk yesterday, and to-day she brought me her baby to mind. Oh, it was good of her."

"I am glad to hear this of Mrs. Owen. Yes, I had been told that you refused to see her."

"I won't shut out any one again," said Mary.

"And they'll come to you," said Mr. Alison. "You'll see that they'll come to you. Now, I have nothing more to say, except good-bye, which means 'God be with you.'"

Nor had Mr. Alison overrated either the kindliness of his parishioners or the measure of the esteem in which Mary was held by them. Every one, it appeared, was determined to show her that her position in the community had suffered no change; and even a humiliation to which she was presently subjected was turned as if by a miracle to another sign that

that in Mary's gentle nature which had hitherto won her the respect of her fellows had forfeited nothing of its subtle power.

Closely following upon the departure of the clergyman, a knock announced a visitor. She remembered her promise to him, and went to the door. She trembled for what might be in store for her as she recognized the new-comer.

Loo Hughes stood on the threshold. Her back was towards Mary as the door was opened. Something had caught her volatile attention, and she was looking up the street. She was humming. Mary saw that her ulster had burst at the sleeve—an old rent—and was not mended. Her hat was dingy, but it had a pseudo-smartness that was full of strange suggestion. It sat rakishly, perhaps, on her untidy hair. She turned as she became conscious of Mary's presence.

"Good-afternoon, Mrs. Redwing. I was passin', an' I thought I'd just look in an' see how you was. I thought it'd cheer you up maybe to see a friend."

Mary stood back to allow her visitor to enter. This Miss Hughes did without ceremony, though she had never before been inside the cottage. She looked round inquisitively as she sat down.

"Well, Mrs. Redwing," she said, when she had finished her survey, "for it's to be Mrs. Redwing still, I suppose, though folks never called me nothing more than 'miss,'—unless indeed it was Loo, an' sometimes even 'Liberty,' after I had my trouble,—there's

some as would bear you a grudge for the difference that has been made between us. But I am not like that. There's no one can say as Loo Hughes is big-sorted. I'm not one for feelin' ill-will nor malice. Nor yet I am not one of those who treat you like pitch whatever, just because you've happened to trip a bit in the path of life. I say we are but human, the best of us, an' what's done cannot be undone, an' there's no remeddy. We're more to be pitied than blamed, I say, an' I'll be bound you was treated shameful at the time."

The last words seemed to be spoken partly in question. Mary did not answer them.

"One's punished an' another goes scot-free," said Miss Hughes; "that's the way of the world. It's the poor women as suffers. We're too soft-hearted, all of us, and too ready to believe their deceivin' words whatever. I daresay you was told as you'd be taken to church, like I was. They all say that, but they don't write it down, indeed; an' what's the good of all the words as ever was spoken, if there's nobody by but yourself to hear them. Oh, if I was to tell you the way my Willy's father behaved to me!"

Seeing that Miss Hughes plunged forthwith into a recital of her experiences, it is not quite clear why she need have thought fit to preface the last sentence with a tentative conjunction. Her tongue tripped along, dancing lightly as it touched on matters that made Mary's cheeks to burn. It frolicked with sordid details, and jiggled upon shameful things; it capered

on all that is sacred, and played hopscotch with modesty. Mary heard and shuddered.

"And so," said Miss Hughes, in conclusion, "I don't set up to blame nobody, an' what I say is as we've no business to be hard on them as have known temptation. There's many as have never been tempted at all, an' there's some as only wish they might be — not but what I daresay they don't pray, 'Lead us not into,' with the best of them. An' it ain't every one as has the looks which you an' me, Mrs. Redwing, may pride ourselves upon. It's looks as takes a man's fancy any day. Well, if my Willy's father had n't behaved so bad to me, an' if you had n't had your little bit of trouble, we should n't p'r'aps be sittin' here talkin' so comfortable."

Then it was that some exclamation which could not be restrained passed Mary's lips. The sound had a strange effect upon the other woman. Her small, bright eyes scanned Mary's face and saw the tears that trembled on her lashes.

"I ask your pardon, Mrs. Redwing," she said abruptly, and in quite another tone from that of jaunty familiarity in which she had been talking. "I did n't ought to have spoken to you as I have been speakin'. I did n't ought to have come here at all. You're as different from what I am as silk from sackcloth. I've been insultin' you every word I've said, but I ask you to think I did n't mean it, and to believe as I'm truly sorry."

She rose from her chair, and was gone almost be-

fore Mary realized the change that had taken place. Nor was she ever heard again to say a word that was slighting of Mary behind her back.

All day, on one pretext or another, people came to the door of the cottage to assure Mary of their good-will and respect. Not that they did it in so many words—though a few with good intentions and as little tact talked about bygones and the frailty of the best of us—but their sympathy was unmistakable.

And so Mary spoke no more of leaving Maen Gorsedd. The kindness of her neighbours touched and vanquished her. She tried vainly to thank them, and finally deputed the task to Mrs. Pughs.

“Tell them that I never thought such charity possible,” she said with tears in her eyes.

But the landlady of the Cambrian Arms declared that her neighbours were doing no more than was right, and needed no special commendation.

“The person,” she said, “whether man or woman, as went back upon you after all these years, would be wantin’ in common humanity.”

“Don’t say that,” said Mary.

For one there was who did not join the rest. Days passed. They became weeks. Little by little Mary gained courage to hold up her head once more. Peggy went back to school. Life slipped into its old grooves.



## CHAPTER XXIV

BUT though her life was once more on the old lines, it ran under conditions that were wholly new. There came a time when Mary could look back with shuddering to the days when her secret had not been known. The winter that was over had held her keenest suffering and seemed to epitomize it, so that ever after an icebound world stood to her for the symbol of a world in pain. As the year advanced, she went about her work to a tune of brightening skies and opening buds. The thaw that followed closely on the events just recorded, had its counterpart in her own feelings. With the loosening of the iron bonds that gripped Nature, those that bound her heart relaxed, and it, seeming to expand, held a song. God was in the song, and thanksgiving, and all good. Vows were in it, and dedication.

Save for the thought of Peter, which came from time to time to disturb her, it may be said that Mary was happier than she had ever been before. She knew now that in the eight years of her sojourn amongst the people of Maen Gorsedd, her fears had never been wholly at rest. It had needed but a friend who wished to be more than a friend, or a foe who desired to be nothing less, to show her how insecure was her position. The worst was over now. God had been

gracious to her in permitting the graciousness of man.

Peggy was back at school. No difference was made between her and other children. The very wonder died out.

But the silence of Peter, where all the rest had spoken to assure her of their good-will, showed her plainly that he could not forgive her sin. The knowledge that she was not the tainted thing he thought her, engendered, with the days as they went by, a certain pride, which enabled her to struggle at least to regard him as unjust, and thus stifle the pain which still threatened her in all her new happiness. But she could not always stifle it. Some lines she had almost forgotten recurred to her and she hummed them over to herself. It seemed to her that it was not without import that the tune to which she had fitted them demanded that the last of them should always be given twice.

She sang the words, and said them till they seemed true. She had found, then, the reason for the silence of Peter? If he had, indeed, cared for her, as he had said, would he not have come to her in the hour of her humiliation?

So pride came to Mary.

In these days, more than ever, did she devote herself to Peggy. With the lifting of the burden her secret had hitherto laid upon her, her spirits were released from a weight that had borne them down. Lady Llandrindod wrote to her poet that the young

woman who had inspired him with the beginnings of poems that perhaps were never written now seemed a young girl. Ten years had been taken off those she had lived.

"It quite makes one wish," wrote the good lady, "that one had one's self some little bygone indiscretion to reveal on the same terms. I wonder whether confession is always as salutary?"

The poet, in writing back, suggested an amendment of the general exhortation in the Book of Common Prayer: ". . . to the end that we may obtain — remission of our ages," upon which (and a postcard) Lady Llandrindod thought fit to reprove him for "profanity."

In truth, Mary felt a new being. It was with enjoyment as well as interest that she entered into the games and amusements of her little daughter. She became a child again as she played with her, and with other children, in the fields. Mr. Alison, in his walks, sometimes came upon them, and stopped one day to watch.

Mary walked round the ring of children singing —

"I wrote a letter to my love,  
An' on the way I dropt it;  
An' one of you has picked it up,  
An' put it in her pocket."

Then, according to the rules of the game, she quickened her pace, and flicked each child lightly with her handkerchief, saying, "Not you, nor you, nor you, nor you, nor you, . . ." till with the suddenness

that has its part in the excitement of all games of the sort, she threw the handkerchief at one and ran. It chanced to be at Peggy.

The chase began, Mary ran, Peggy ran. How they ran! Mr. Alison was as excited as the children. Somebody stumbled. There was a little scream of laughter, and mother and child were locked, laughing and breathless, in each other's arms.

"I need n't ask is it well with you?"

Mary, blushing and smiling, said — "Oh, sir!"

"How fast you run, Mrs. Redwing."

"You must think I've taken leave of my senses, sir?"

"On the contrary, you have learnt wisdom. Was I right, Mrs. Redwing?"

"In tellin' me not to run, sir?"

Mr. Alison's eyes twinkled.

"Ah," he answered, "I said I need not ask."

Mary had developed a sense of humour — or so he supposed, and drew his own conclusions. But, in fact, Mary was only finding herself. She was becoming the girl she had been before misfortune overtook her and changed the direction of her growth. It was for her laughter that Peggy's father had first noticed her — her light, infectious laughter that had seldom rung out in Maen Gorsedd, but that now began to take to itself the old charm which was the young charm. Mary laughed as she played with the children, and this she did as often as she could spare time from her work. Sometimes so content did she appear

to herself in these new days that she had to remind herself that she had sinned and come short of the glory of God. It was her deception, then, and not her sin, that had weighed upon her — the deceit which had been defiling, not the sin? Almost it seemed so. But Peter thought her stained. . . .

It was the one disquieting thing.

There came a lovely day in spring, as it verged on summer, when Mary had occasion to go to a farm lying in a direction in which she seldom went at this time, for it lay in that of Maes Derwen. The trees and hedges and the fields were vividly green as she went her way. The colour was insistent as the singing of the birds. Larks besieged heaven with song. Mary sought them out — tiny specks against the blue. The day was full of sounds. From the woods came the cooing of pigeons and the blow of a wood-cutter's axe. The lumbering roll of a waggon with its sturdy team on a distant road, the occasional crack of the driver's whip, the bark of a sheep-dog, the tinkle of a bell, the shouts of men at work, and a million other noises had their part in the music of the morning. Half-forgotten emotions stirred in Mary's heart as she listened; vague memories of her girlhood brushed her as the breeze a flower. Thoughts incomplete, unrealized; subtle imaginings, and unfinished dreams fluttered through her mind like leaves on the summer wind.

Thus had she felt when love came into her life. Love had marred it.



A sparrow, with something in his little beak, flew into the hedge, and Mary heard the clamour of nestlings.

Peggy, a babe at her breast. . . . Had love so marred her life? With Peggy as the outward and visible sign of love, she could not think so. She wondered whether she was unrepentant — as Peter perhaps would think her. She looked into her heart, and found there thanksgiving only. Her heart was singing as Nature sang. Peter alone could not understand.

She began to hum. A tune formed itself, and took words. The lane was empty as far as she could see, which was to the point of its abrupt bend. She sang louder —

“Oh, tell me whence love cometh!  
Love comes uncalled, unsent.  
Oh, tell me where love goeth!  
That was not love that went.”

The fourth line in its repetition took its wonted persistence.

She reached the corner, and turned it. She came face to face with some one standing in her path — Peter! It was evident that he had been coming down the road when her voice had arrested his steps.

There was a moment of awkward silence. In it Mary had time to note some little change in his appearance. She was scarcely conscious of doing this, but remembered it in retrospect, just as she remembered how the sunlight had caught and illumined the nap here and there on his coat, and how there was a

small charred spot upon his sleeve which had possibly been burnt at some period by an ash from his pipe. A dog was at his heels, and advanced to Mary wagging its tail. She saw that it was not Rover, and then remembered that Rover had gone with Clover to Aberllwyn, and she said, "Rover and Clover," to herself, as if the sound of the names struck her for the first time, and smiled mentally; but outwardly her face did not alter.

Peter was the first to speak.

"I knew it was you," he said. "I heard you comin'."

"I believe I was singin'," said Mary.

"Yes, you were singin'." His eyes were on her face.

Mary was silent. A thrush started from the hedge with a shrill cry of warning to a mate, or alarm for itself or its young, and she turned her head in the direction of the sound. But when the pause had lasted for a second or two, and Mary felt that Peter was still looking at her, she was impelled to fill it. She had no very clear recollection afterwards of what she said. She made as if she would continue her walk.

But Peter turned, and began to walk beside her.

"You were goin' the other way."

"Let me go a bit of the road with you."

"I have to hurry."

"We will walk fast."

Mary hesitated.

"I would rather walk alone," she said then.

Peter met her eyes.

"You are cruel as ever."

"Was I cruel?"

They stopped, and were face to face.

"I have suffered."

"Have not I?"

She could have laughed. The first anger she had ever felt towards him she felt then. Yet he had suffered, and she saw the traces of his suffering in his face. There were lines that used not to be there.

"Do you think it has cost me nothin' not to see you all this while?"

"Ah," said Mary, "the only one who did not come!"

A recollection of what she had gone through made her voice unsteady. She turned away for a moment, and looked out across the valley. It was basking in sunlight. The canal, a gleaming streak, cut it in twain. Here and there a red roof stood out from the universal green. A few white clouds sailed lightly in the blue above.

"I had n't done you any wrong," she said presently. "I told you what I had told no one else. That was to warn you. I tried from the beginnin' to stop what was comin'. I tried, that is, to stop it as soon as I knew myself that you was thinkin' of me. If I had hidden facts from you, and allowed you to marry me, you would have had some reason for shrinkin' from me. You kept away when all the rest came!"

She broke off and looked aside once more.

"You don't understand," said Peter.

"No, I don't understand."

There was a long silence. Peter broke it.

"Sometimes," he said slowly, "it seems to me as I don't understand either."

Mary knew that he did not, and the knowledge softened her.

"Our ways parted long ago," she said gently; "if, indeed, they ever ran together. We can't have much to say to each other now, and whatever we say can't make things any better. Let it be good-bye now."

"I don't want to say good-bye."

His tone implied more than his words. Mary heard with surprise.

"I want to say it, Mr. Davidson. I have had great, great unhappiness, and now I am beginnin' to be happy again. People have been very good to me and to Peggy. What is known of me has n't been let to make any difference. Please don't talk to me now."

"You think I never loved you?"

Mary raised her eyes to his.

"You think you were deceived in me?" she said. "You think it was a good woman you loved and not me? You think I am not a good woman? Answer me this."

Peter saw the strange look in Mary's face, but he did not know that the words she spoke were given almost as a test. He came nearer to her. She was beautiful at that moment. He thought still that he

could not forgive her sin, and she knew that he thought it. But he hungered for her. She knew that, too. It made her angry again, she knew not why, and also she felt then that she loved him exceedingly.

"I am miserable without you," he said.

She shook her head. He caught her hand, and held it against his heart.

"I love you!" he whispered. His face was close to hers. His heart beat against her hand.

She shook her head again, not trusting herself to speak.

"I love you!" he said.

She found her voice.

"You are deceivin' yourself."

"I want to be deceived."

She mustered strength enough to tear herself from him.

"I know . . ." he said; "and I want you for my wife."

This seemed the answer to Mary's test. She refused him then, not once, but many times, and at length he left her.



## CHAPTER XXV

PETER strode down the lane, looking neither to the right hand nor to the left, after he parted from Mary. His mind was in a ferment. Through the tumult of it he felt vaguely that he himself was in some way answerable for her reiterated refusal to marry him, but his preconceived and unbending judgements prevented him from knowing how or why. His eyes were blinded that he might not see.

He groaned aloud in his pain. He was suffering acutely. The meeting with Mary had increased tenfold the torment which the last year had brought him. His words had been sudden, but they were the outcome of long days and nights of restless trouble. He had believed them unpremeditated ; but, in truth, for weeks it had needed but a sight of her to bring them to his tongue. His endurance and his stubborn will had enabled him to keep of intention out of her way ; but against chance he could not guard himself, and for a chance meeting they had held themselves in waiting.

To Mary the words themselves had seemed an insult ; yet, had she known it, they marked the change which was going on in Peter, and which Clover had predicted in the strange moment of her prophetic exaltation. The Peter who spoke them was not quite the Peter who, condemning Jenny Brecon,

had his share indirectly in her death. But a greater change still was to take place in him before, from the final passing through the fire, should emerge the new Peter with the opened eyes.

A false step led him to the furnace.

He was maddened with the thought of Mary. She had never seemed to him more beautiful nor more to be desired. The simplicity of her taste had always appealed to a certain æstheticism in his nature, and he thought of the plain cotton dress she was wearing, and of a little bunch of buttercups, picked, perhaps, in the fields as she went, and stuck into the band that circled her supple waist. He remembered the yellow of the flowers against the black. It had caught his eye again and again. It stood out in the impression the recent meeting had left upon him. It seemed to lay stress upon the contentment of which she had spoken to him. She wore flowers — had the zeal to pick and wear them ; she must be happy, as she had said. She did not wish to jeopardize her new-found happiness. It was a thing to shield. He saw from the colour in her cheeks and her lips, and from the liveness of her carriage, that it had brought her health.

The sound of her voice was in his ears — the gentle voice, that, even in the anger which he had not understood, lost nothing of its charm. Mary, we know, spoke rather more correctly and with a truer accent than the average woman of her class ; and Peter, for whom the fact of her trespass could obscure the in-

nate purity of her soul, was yet fully alive to the comparative refinement of her speech. He heard her again and again saying the plain and direct words in which she had refused to marry him.

He increased his pace. The action was almost automatic. It came of his nerves in tension. His eyes were on the ground.

So perturbed was he that he did not observe a cart which was coming along the road till it was close to him, and he heard himself greeted by name.

"Mr. Davidson, and it's well, indeed, I didn't run over you!"

Peter raised a preoccupied face.

It was Hannah Rees who addressed him. She pulled up as she spoke. She was driving an old horse of her father's, and the parcels in the cart told that she had been shopping in Borderhampton. A roll of wire-netting lay at her feet, and some packets in stiff blue paper looked like groceries. A number of a penny journal lay amongst them, crumpled and ill-cut — probably with a hasty finger for a paper-knife.

"I don't believe you know me now," she said, with a laugh. "I shall have to offer more than a penny, I can see, for thoughts as grave as yours."

"I get absent-minded," said Peter. "It's bein' so much alone."

"I'm likethat, too," said Hannah. "I get broodin'."

From where she sat in the cart a wider stretch of country was visible than that which had met the eyes of Mary a few minutes since; Hannah could see the

red towers of the Castle standing up above the elms.

"Not that it does much good," she added.

"It does no good," said Peter.

He had not yet recovered himself, and he fell to thinking again. The horse shifted his feet. Peter's dog lay down in the road.

Hannah looked away from the prospect of the hill and valley, and looked down at Peter as he stood beside the cart. Assuredly there was that which was unusual in his mood. She felt certain that something had happened to disturb him. The conviction affected her strangely. She knew suddenly that it was somehow in her power to force the hand of fate. She had been reading her "novelette" as she drove along the lonely roads. The love-making in it had stirred her senses. She was full of sentiment. She felt as the young leaves feel, perhaps, when the sap flows with the springtime, and they uncurl themselves and spread out their greenness to the sun's caress. Many subtle instincts had their expression in the impulse that moved her to bend forward and put her fingers lightly upon his shoulder. He started a little, and, waking from his reverie, looked up.

"I believe you're in some trouble," she said.

"None as time won't cure."

"I've thought that of trouble before now."

"You've no trouble."

"Ah!" She gave a laugh.

He saw that her eyes were misty.

"Tell me," he said.

"We were friends once," said Hannah, "and could have told each other —"

"Friends once — friends always."

"I wish I could think that."

"I have n't so many that I can spare one."

A cuckoo was calling from a distant copse. The soft, round sound came intermittently. There it was; and again; and it should be due now; and it was not till — now. "Cuckoo! cuckoo!" Love was in the air. Hannah bent lower.

"You spared me easy enough. Is n't that trouble enough for me?"

"Would it have troubled you?"

"Perhaps."

"A small trouble, and without reason."

"None so small."

"Without reason."

He repeated the words, as if to convince himself. Hannah had been first, after all. He recalled the days when her presence had attracted him to the New Farm. To forget the time since then! Could she help him to forget it? Could she blot it out for him? Could she exorcise the spell of Mary, the woman who had sinned?

He took a long long look at her. She saw something that was feverish in his face and her eyes fell under his; but not before she knew that all that she had longed for was at hand.

Mary had driven him back upon himself. He



thought of Maes Derwen and his empty life. He was losing his best days. Hannah's big eyes were heavy with passion. She had always loved him and Mary never; else why did Mary now refuse with steadfastness to marry him? A wife, children of his own, these were what he wanted. Nature had ordained that man should need the one and the other. Hannah's full eyelids drooped over her eyes. He saw how her bosom rose and fell. The hand that held the reins relaxed its hold on them, and lay in her lap. The other was still on his shoulder, and gradually it seemed to gather weight. The reins hung loosely over the shafts. The horse stood quite still. The mid-day was drowsy.

Peter moved his head. His cheek was against her hand. He turned his face slowly till his lips brushed it.

## CHAPTER XXVI

MARY heard the news that night. The speed with which it travelled qualified it to be accounted ill, and more than one head was shaken. But Mary heard it with outward calmness. Then, for three Sundays, she listened in Maen Gorsedd church to the publication of the banns of marriage between Peter Davidson, bachelor, of the parish of Derwen, and Hannah Rees, spinster of that parish, and held her breath. No cause or just impediment was forthcoming why those two persons should not be joined together in holy matrimony, and in due time the wedding-day came round.

It broke gorgeously. Mary was awake when the first streaks of light crept round the blind. She rose and dressed herself. There was pink in the east, whence the sun was shaking himself free from the hazy mists. Pink and gold were reflected in the canal. Mary's shadow was very long. The air was cool after the hot night. She drew it deeply into her lungs. Peter's wedding-day — the birds were awake betimes to greet it. How they sang! Let them sing for Peter's wedding. Let the sun gild the morning. Let Nature hold a revel.

Some early hay had been cut, and the scent of it hung in the morning air. It was not till Mary stood in the field in which it lay strewn, like dead soldiers on a plain, that she asked herself to what end she

had risen and was abroad. Some hours must pass yet ere the work of the day began. She had left her bed because she could not lie in it. That was all the answer she could make.

She looked round, wondering what to do. The world was her own. The restlessness that had driven her out seemed to desert her as she looked over the expanse of shining meadows. She picked up a wisp of hay, and, dividing it into strands, which held different grasses, dog's-tail, fox-tail, and fescue, she began to plait it idly. But while her fingers twisted the grasses aimlessly, her eyes and ears were open to all that happened in the early day. She was in the strangely receptive state that sometimes accompanies unwonted excitement. Her senses seemed sharpened, and in that inertness which had succeeded her recent restlessness, her mind was keenly sensitive to impression. Alone in the empty fields, she felt herself very near to Nature. Insect life was about her. Small winged things flew past her. A ladybird alighted upon one of her hands. It closed its wings and drew them in under their shining shields of spotted red. The colour was smooth as Limoges enamel ; Mary marvelled at its smoothness. A green fly settling for a moment upon her sleeve was like a living jewel. Little white moths fluttered over the hay.

A sound different from others that beat gently upon the stillness of the morning caught her ear. She threw down the plait of hay and listened. The emerald fly was gone. The ladybird spread her wings, losing all

her beauty when she flew, and becoming as any other flying beetle. Footsteps were coming along the silent road. They were coming nearer. Mary's hands hung at her sides. She looked over her shoulder in the direction of the approaching sound. From where she was standing that part of the road along which the steps were moving was not visible to her. A high hedge, broken by the gate at which she had entered the field, divided it from the highway, and Mary, wondering who it might be that shared the empty world with her, and not wishing to be seen, for reasons which took in perhaps a fear of tramps, stepped quietly into shelter of it, choosing, moreover, that additionally of an oak which stood close beside it. The trunk of the tree, a mass some three feet in diameter, formed with the blackthorn hedge a corner in which she was concealed from view on two sides. The third was open to the new-mown meadow.

The steps still came nearer. They had not the elasticity of those of a young man going to his work on a morning so fresh as this. But they had not the shuffle nor the softness she was wont to associate with those of a tramp. The walker was well-shod one would have said. He passed Mary close upon the other side of the hedge, and then the arrest of his footsteps told her that he had paused at the gate. She had been standing a few yards from it in the meadow when she had first become conscious of his approach. She was glad she had moved.

He would walk on presently, she supposed, and

looked about her. A yellow fungus grew at her feet. She watched a caterpillar travelling with hooping back over its polished surface. Hawkweed and yarrow were amongst the wild plants in the low bank beside her. An ant dragged a dead fly over many obstacles towards the nest. A dandelion had the colour and shape of the sun. Shadows were growing shorter. When would the intruder upon her solitude depart? She sighed impatiently. It had been no effort to stand quite still and silent as she plaited the strands of hay out there in the field, but now the necessity of remaining so made it irksome. In reality, when she began to feel her position wearisome, she had stood in hiding for a few minutes only, but the time seemed longer. She regretted that she had hidden herself, for now to move would be to proclaim herself a spy. Would he never go? His stay might be indefinite.

The caterpillar left the fungus. A butterfly shook the golden dandelion. Another minute passed. She had forgotten that this was Peter's wedding-day, and remembered it suddenly. What wonder if circumstances conspired against her? She looked at the trunk of the oak. Cobwebby substances, filmy and woolly, were here and there in the crevices of the bark. A woodlouse, cased like an armadillo, crept stealthily down a minute ravine. She touched him with her finger, and he rolled himself up and fell, a hard ball, into a niche which stopped his fall earthwards. She wondered vaguely whether his wedge-shaped



prison would allow presently of his uncurling. Something moved in the tree. She glanced upwards. A squirrel was swinging down from bough to bough. He alighted upon a branch close over her head, and peered at her with shining eyes. There was no fear in them, only an inquisitiveness that filled her with a momentary delight. She drew her breath silently. In truth she was very near to the life of the field, so near that the little red animal seemed ready to accept her as a part of the world in which he lived. She half believed he was going to jump on to her shoulder, when a movement at the gate caused her to turn her head, and the little creature took fright and darted back into closer foliage above. She saw his red tail disappearing amongst the leaves, and felt almost as if she had broken faith with him, or abused his confidence.

She was regretting her involuntary action, when the sound which had attracted her sudden attention was repeated. Something was rustling in the hay, nearer, at her side. A dog came round the tree, found her, barked, wagging his tail. Mary heard a whistle. The animal ran out and back, barking, and wagging his tail.

“Watch!”

Mary started violently. She pressed nearer to the tree, her ear almost against the bark. The dog ran towards her again — Peter’s dog, she knew him now. And it was Peter who was standing at the gate a few yards from her! What brought him, like her, to the empty fields at daybreak? He must not find her.

She receded farther into her hiding-place, scarcely daring to breathe.

"What is it, Watch?" said Peter's voice.

She heard him climb the gate. He was coming towards her through the hay. When she knew that, she walked out into the field.

"You!" he said. "You!"

His face expressed his amazement. Mary saw that it was pale, and that his eyes had not tasted of sleep.

"I did n't know who might be comin'," she said. "I heard your footstep on the road. I stood in here, meanin' to wait till whoever it was had gone by."

She wore a sunbonnet, and when she looked away across the meadow, as she did now, towards the east, her face was hidden from him. The dog sat down at her feet, and thrust a cold nose under her hand. She stroked the rough head absently.

"What brings you out?" said Peter.

A cow lowed in the distance. Mary looked in the direction of the sound. It seemed to lay stress upon the emptiness of the world that held Peter and herself. So had stood Adam and Eve when they and the beasts owned the earth.

"I was awake," Mary answered.

Peter glanced up at the sky. There were fleecy clouds floating in the blue.

"We shall have rain before long," he said.

"But not to-day."

"Yes; directly."

"I hope not."

She followed his glance to the sky. She had not remarked the presence of the clouds. She saw them now. Some desultory moments followed, then Mary said that she must be going.

"It's good-bye, then," said Peter. "You know about to-day? In a few hours I shall be married." He laughed.

"The sun should shine for a weddin', they say, but I doubt it will shine on mine. Won't you wish me the happiness you've denied me? Come, you can do that."

"I hope you will be very happy," Mary said steadily, and meeting his eyes with hers.

Peter laughed again—but so strangely. The sound of his laugh rang in her ears long after she had reached home and was trying to fill up her time till the work of the day should begin.

## CHAPTER XXVII

BY seven o'clock, the day which had broken so gorgeously was overcast with clouds. Miss Vaughan, whose boxes [stood ready packed in her room, and waiting for their removal in the course of the afternoon, looked up at the sky, and sighed gloomily. She was going back to her own home after the ceremony, and she was perhaps inclined to take a despondent view of things generally. She told herself that she would not have felt easy if her wedding-day looked so.

"It puts me in the mind," she said to Jane Marton, "of the mornin' my cousin Anne James was married, an' her first baby's memorial lies in my box this minute."

Two hours later rain began to fall. She went to the window. The valley was full of mist; the hills were shut out.

Peter seemed indifferent to omens.

Up at the New Farm, Hannah noted the heavens, and clenched her teeth.

"It's just as if it was to spite me," she said. "It's been fine these three weeks!"

"If it don't clear," said Mrs. Rees, "I wouldn't put on my white satin shoes if I was you. You'll get 'em all spoilt walkin' up the path to the church."

"I'd wear 'em if I had to walk across a ploughed field!" said Hannah. She shook her fist at the sky as she spoke.

"Well, please yourself," said Mrs. Rees; "only don't be too late gettin' ready if I'm to help you. I shall have plenty of work, I know, to get your father dressed in time. There, Hannah, don't look so vexed. I daresay it 'll pick up a bit presently."

"It won't do that," said Hannah; but she spoke less fiercely. "Do you think it's dreadfully unlucky?" she added presently.

Mrs. Rees scanned her face.

"I would n't worry about that," she said; "and you can't complain of your luck in bein' chosen by Peter Davidson. It 'll be your own fault if you're not happy."

"Yes, I've got Peter Davidson," said Hannah absently.

The weather showed no signs of mending. The sky grew darker, Hannah's mood varied. She was now elated with triumph, now consumed with un-availing rage, now troubled with a vague uneasiness. When, however, she stood dressed and ready for the bridegroom, her appearance gave her a natural satisfaction.

Mrs. Rees surveyed her with manifest approval.

"You look a bride every inch," she said. "Perhaps you was right about the shoes, too. You're a handsome girl, Hannah, that I will say, an' one as a man might be proud to lead to the altar."



"You 've been very good to me," Hannah said suddenly.

"It's a pity we have n't got on better," Mrs. Rees answered. "I don't know as it's been my fault, indeed, an' yet I don't know perhaps as it has n't. There, kiss me, Hannah. Bygones is bygones, anyway."

Hannah surprised her step-mother by returning her kiss with some warmth.

"Now I'll go an' see to your father," said Mrs. Rees. "I've got to set myself to rights, too, though I'm all dressed under. Now, don't you crush your skirt when you sit down. It'll be time to start before we can look about us."

Mrs. Rees hurried away. Hannah waited in the parlour listening to her step-mother's footfall in the room above, and to a loud and creaking footfall which was that of her father. She looked at the presents which were spread out upon a table. They consisted for the most part of useful things. One or two only were purely ornamental.

A quarter of an hour went by. The loud and creaking footfall sounded in a longer journey across the room. A door was opened. The steps resounded on the wooden stairs, and Mr. Rees made his appearance. He had shaved himself with special care, and his smooth face shone as if it had been polished. His hair was brushed forward over his ears. A large cameo pin fastened his silk cravat, and he wore the nankeen waistcoat in which he had been married to

his two wives. The creases in his trousers told of their long folding.

"You look right grand, father!"

Mr. Rees chuckled and brushed a speck of dust off his cuff.

"Indeed, if I'm not to be gay at your weddin', I don't know when I would be," he said. "Wait till you see mother, that's all!"

Mrs. Rees's toilet had been shrouded in mystery. She had worked at it late and early. She rustled in presently. She was arrayed in a green-sprigged silk dress and a mantle with jet drops. Her bonnet was edged with bronze beads, and she carried a new pair of lavender gloves with black points.

Some minutes were spent in discussion. The silk had belonged to her mother. Mrs. Rees had had it lying by she did not know how long.

"I never liked to put scissors to it, somehow. An' yet I says to myself, 'What's the good of havin' a thing an' no one so much as seein' it? It's not right. Why not wear it Hannah's weddin'?' So I set to work an' made it up. How's the skirt set, Hannah?"

Hannah gave her approval.

Mrs. Rees bridled with pleasure. "Now, father, it's time for us to be goin'," she said. "You get your coat on, an' tell Lewis bring the cart round. Have you got your cloak ready, Hannah? That's right. You're goin' to wear white shoes? Well, weddin'-days come but once in a life for most of us. Put the hood right over, I would. I've got a word or two to say to Kitty 'fore I start."

She was heard giving last directions.

"Some would say I'd ought to stopped at home to see to things," she said, when the three were settled in the cart, "but I was all forward with everything, an' I can trust Kitty."

The bridegroom and his best man, a certain John Williams, a school-friend of Peter's, were standing at the church door when the bride and her parents arrived. Miss Vaughan was divesting herself of her wraps in the porch. She took off her waterproof cloak with its waterproof rosette in the middle of the back, and discovered to admiring beholders puce satin with gold buttons. There was much unpinning to be done before the looped-up festoons, which had expressed themselves through the waterproof in strange protuberances, fell out, and her skirts swept the ground in their full glory. A stain, however, on her gloves, damped her spirits, and called her attention once more to the gloomy day.

"T't, t't, t't, t't," she muttered under her breath; but Hannah heard her.

Clover and Lloyd Morgan arrived presently, and others. Despite the weather, quite a little crowd of spectators assembled. The unpinning and unwraping over, the party passed on out of the porch into the church itself. Here the rain pattered dismally and insistently against the windows.

Miss Vaughan approached Clover on noticeable tiptoe.

"Just hark to it!" she whispered into Clover's

ears. "It could n't be more dispiritin' if it was the dust-to-dust service we was here for instead of the joyful solemnation of holy matrimony. Do you think she feels frightened?"

Clover said that she should think Hannah would have more sense than to be alarmed at an accident of weather.

"Well, indeed, if we're spared, we shall see what it means," said Miss Vaughan. "I never knew a sign yet that meant nothing."

Hannah shivered as she waited in the dim church.

It was full early, and Mr. Alison had not arrived. The stained windows did not make what light there was the stronger. She looked up at Lazarus emerging in grave-clothes from the tomb.

Peter fingered the ring in his pocket. Involuntarily his thoughts wandered to the cottage under the limes, and he wondered what Mary was doing. He did not think that she would come to look on at his marriage. Mrs. Pughs was in the church, and Mrs. Roberts and Mrs. Evans were there also. They would come up to the New Farm at four o'clock for tea, and to taste the wedding-cake—the cake that marked his marriage with Hannah. They would tell Mary about it, and Mary would be silent, and would know that, had she so willed it, the wedding might have been her own. He thought of his vigil of the night before, and of his aimless walk in the small hours and the dawn, and of his meeting with Mary. How strange it all was! He fell into a reverie.

A few more people gathered in the church. Mr. Alison arrived. He emerged from the vestry in his surplice, and the service began. The gloom, however, in the chancel was so pronounced that the clergyman, whose eyes were not strong, had to ask for a light. A short delay ensued. It was the middle of the week and it chanced that the oil-lamps had been emptied on the day before for their fortnightly cleaning, and would not be retrimmed till Saturday. It seldom happened that they were wanted between the Sundays. The bridal party waited uncomfortably at the communion rails and in the chancel while a candle was fetched from the cupboard behind the organ. Two matches were struck ineffectually before a third ignited the wick. The flame sank, and it was a moment or two before it burned up. Then there was nowhere to put it, so the sexton who had procured it, held it while Mr. Alison read. It seemed to those who were present only to enhance the gloom.

Miss Vaughan's face wore an expression of portentive dismay. She exchanged glances with any one whose eyes chanced to meet her own.

The service progressed. Hannah's hand was cold when Peter slipped the ring upon her finger. The metal was warm from his pocket, where it had lain against his thigh. Hannah felt it warm upon her cold finger. The warmth stole through her body. The ring brought her his warmth. It was like a kiss. An intoxication of triumph crept over her. What matter that the sky hung low, and the rain fell in tor-



rents, and that it was upon Lazarus in his grave-clothes that her eyes rested when she looked up? Peter was hers. There was not a girl in the village who did not envy her. She gazed down on the little band of gold that bound his body to her body, his soul to her soul, for life, and she wished with a sudden fierceness of desire that showed itself in her burning eyes, when she turned them upon his, that the union could be to all eternity.

"Till death us do part," she said to herself. Her thoughts wandered from the service. She had won in the fight with Mary. The hopes that had seemed the most extravagant had been realized. She dwelt in retrospect upon the day when she had first thought of the dressmaker as a foe. She remembered the thin wedding-ring. Attendant memories flashed across her.

"... as long as ye do well, and are not afraid with any amazement."

The voice of Mr. Alison seeming to come gradually nearer, as a sound that falls upon the ear with cumulative force, smote through her reverie. Presently she and Peter were signing their names in the parish register and she realized that he was indeed her husband. She could scarcely restrain her exultation.

Then in the porch the pair received congratulations, and the work of pinning up skirts and putting on cloaks was gone through afresh. It was some minutes before a start could be made.

Peter, it was said afterwards, was all that a bride-

groom should be. Mary heard that he had a laugh and a joke with all who wished him joy.

"The lower road?" he asked, as the party settled themselves in the vehicles that were to take them up to the New Farm.

Hannah's face was flushed and her eyes were shining.

"Through the village," she said.

"Why?"

"Through the village," she said again.

Every one objected. There was more shelter by the way which Peter had proposed; but Hannah stuck to her point.

"The bride's will, son-in-law?" Mr. Rees said, chuckling.

"For to-day," answered Peter gaily.

Halfway through the street, Hannah put down her umbrella. The rain was driving against the cart, and Peter, with drops hanging to the brim of his hat, glanced at her in surprise. She leaned forward. He saw her expression with wonder, and not taking in for a moment whereat her exultant and insolent gaze was directed, he turned and followed it with his eyes. The hand which held the reins gave a sudden convulsive twitch, and the horse started forward. It was at the windows of Mary's cottage that Hannah was levelling her insult, and a movement behind the curtain told Peter that it had reached its mark.

Hannah put up her umbrella with a laugh under her breath, but she had not seen her husband's face.

## CHAPTER XXVIII

A MOMENT later, Hannah's own face turned an ashy white. There came slowly down the village street, and through the splashing rain a dark procession. It needed but a glance to tell its nature.

Four men carried a coffin. A piece of tarpaulin had been thrown over its trappings to protect them from the weather, but its sinister shape was not the less clearly defined.

Three women and a little child followed. They wore cloaks over their black dresses, but though one of these was grey, and that of the child was brown, the sombre hues of their mourning appeared to permeate their figures. One, looking quickly at them as they moved solemnly along under their drenched umbrellas, would assuredly have had the impression of four persons in black. Two men walked behind. Their hot faces seemed to suggest that they had recently been relieved from a long turn in bearing the grim burden.

Peter's horse set back his ears, and eyed the coffin askance. Peter drew to the side of the road to allow the procession to pass.

There was then a silence which was broken only by the falling rain and the tramp of the mourners' feet.

The members of the two parties exchanged strange

glances. Miss Vaughan in her seat at the back of the cart where she sat between Mrs. Rees and Clover had made a sudden movement, but no word escaped her. The two carts proceeded on their way.

Mrs. Rees spoke out of the curious silence that had fallen. "I wonder who it would be?" she said. "I did n't seem to know their faces."

"They're not from these parts," said Hannah's father. "I believe I remember one of the men's faces, too. What's the name of those people that took the old turnpike house over Red Stone way?"

"Ah, it might be one of them. Morris—that's it. They're Baptists, and there is n't a buryin'-ground there for the chapel-folk."

"It would be Mrs. Morris, then," said Clover. "I've often heard she was ailin'. The old toll-gate is just by the waterfall, an' I've heard the house is damp as a marsh."

"If they're Baptists, that would account for the time."

"They are, I know."

"That's it, then."

So it was concluded, and correctly, that the body was on its way to the denominational cemetery at Borderhampton.

Miss Vaughan looked at Hannah, and nudged Mrs. Rees. The colour was slowly returning to the bride's face. Hannah felt her step-mother's eyes upon her, and turned round sharply.

"What are you starin' at me for?"

Mrs. Rees started like one caught in a guilty act and looked at Miss Vaughan. Miss Vaughan lost her head at once.

"Indeed, it'd be no wonder if you was upset," she said. "I'm all of a tremble myself. If we'd only gone the other way! It's dreadful. Who could have thought? It's to be hoped nothing will happen."

"What are you talkin' about?" Peter said. He had preserved silence till now, unable as yet to recover himself from the anger he felt at Hannah's action.

"A funeral—for a weddin' to meet a funeral! Oh!"

"I don't suppose it makes much odds what it meets," said Peter. "It's the marriage that matters—" He checked himself.

"Oh, a funeral! Everybody knows—" began Miss Vaughan and broke off.

Hannah looked from her husband to his cousin.

Miss Vaughan nodded her head as if she could say much if she chose. Clover knew the popular superstition, and affected to laugh at it; but she did not expect the fates to smile upon such a union as this, and she trembled for her brother's future. An uncomfortable silence fell once more upon the party.

The funeral, meanwhile, took its slow course through Maen Gorsedd. More than one in the village had seen the meeting of the two processions, the marriage and the burial.

"I thought Mr. Davidson's horse was goin' to shy



at the coffin," said Andrew Jones. "But Mr. Davidson he jest drove to the side of the road, and waited till it had gone by, and Lloyd Morgan drew up too. There was fine scared faces, indeed, in them two carts."

"Miss Rees went as white as a sheet."

"Miss Rees? Mrs. Davidson she was then. A new-wed wife. I should n't have liked it to have happened to me."

"There's meanin' in it."

"An' what a day for a weddin'!"

"Indeed, it seemed made for the buryin'."

"The church was like a vault, anyway."

"It's all of a piece."

Mrs. Wynne remembered a wedding which had been met by a funeral, and the bride was a widow within a week.

"It was Eliza Thomas's weddin' — her as married Enoch Adams — an' when she saw it, she says, 'Me or you, Enoch, is struck for dead,' she says, an' she fainted right away. None of you mind either of them, I suppose, except it was James Humphrey here, who's old enough, an' he'll tell you how Enoch died before the moon changed."

James Humphrey's memory was jogged, and he showed himself ready to bear the story out.

"He died of a sunstroke. He was in the fields, an' he says, like the Shoonemike's son, 'My head! my head!' he says, and before they was get to him —"

Mrs. Wynne sniffed the air contemptuously.

"Indeed, it's not a bit of good to trust to a man's recollection!" she said. "Enoch Adams broke his neck on Death's-Head Bank."

"That's it!" cried the old man, when her amendment had been shouted into his ear.

"Before the moon changed?" said Andrew.

"Yes, indeed; but in general it's any time within the twelvemonth."

So little, apparently, had the village to talk of, that before the group which had collected at the forge for the foregoing gossip dispersed at the dinner hour, it was agreed that it might fairly be looked that Peter or Hannah would be a corpse before the anniversary of their wedding-day was past.

In the course of the afternoon the sky cleared somewhat. Distant thunder was heard, and people accounted to each other for the rain and the gloom of the earlier part of the day by saying that there had been a storm somewhere. Up at the New Farm, the change in the temper of the weather had its part, perhaps, in recovering for Hannah her spirits. She had regained her colour by the time the guests assembled for tea, and she had a smile and a pleasant word for all.

"There's them as marriage improves," Mrs. Pughs was moved to say afterwards in the bar of the Cambrian Arms, "an' there's them as marriage spoils; an' I should n't be surprised but what she was n't one of the first."

The afternoon began with tea-drinking and deco-

rous talk, leavened, now and then, by a jest from a youngster whose time was yet to come, or a reminiscence from one who remembered the fun of other days. Later, when the wines, ginger and currant, had been round freely, and whiskey had appeared, a little less restraint was observed. A sly allusion to "bundling" on the part of an old farmer created laughter amongst such as understood what it meant, and spiced the sober conversation.

Toasts were proposed, and healths were drunk. Hannah, with her heart beating high, forgot that a funeral had met her wedding. But she did not know that in the village it had been said that she or the bridegroom would die. Her laugh rang out gaily. Peter, to whom the incident had caused no anxiety, had not given it a second thought. He looked at his young wife amongst her guests, and, seeing that she was goodly to the sight, he tried to forget the look of triumph and hatred which she had turned upon the windows of Mary's cottage. His eyes followed her about. She met them from time to time. More than one watching him thought, "He loves her!" There came a moment when he thought so himself. Then he believed that he forgave her, and wished for the time when they two should be alone.

At dusk, such guests as had come from afar took their departure. A woman rode away on a pony. A cartful of people started for Borderhampton. Peter's trap, in which he was to take his bride home to Maes

Derwen, came round, and Hannah took leave of her father and her step-mother.

As she put her foot upon the step, something seemed to crack or to snap.

"I'm afraid you've torn your dress," Mrs. Rees said.

Hannah had paused midway as she heard the sound.

"Well, it cannot be helped," she said lightly, taking her seat after a moment's pause. "I daresay it is n't much, an' I shall soon know when I get to Maes Derwen."

Peter sprang up beside her. "Good-bye all," he said.

"Good-bye ; good luck to you both. Good-bye."

Rice was thrown. Grains of it caught in the folds of Hannah's dress, and some lay on the brim of Peter's hat.

## CHAPTER XXIX

PETER DAVIDSON, it may be believed, had not reached the day of his wedding without realizing the serious nature of the step he had taken in his rebound from Mary. A reaction had followed speedily enough upon the excitement which had led him to commit himself to Hannah, but he had never thought of drawing back. That it did not at the time occur to him to question the fairness of his treatment of the girl herself was perhaps the accident of his sex. But as Hannah would, in all probability, have taken him upon his own terms, his action, as it affected her, was not perhaps reprehensible.

He entered upon the married state with a firm intention of making his wife happy so far as lay in his power. All that had happened before belonged to another era. It was to the burial of the hopes and dreams which he had once cherished that he had devoted the last night of his bachelorhood. But now, as he drove Hannah homewards in the trap, a measure of hope returned to him. The look which his face had worn that day for a space had disappeared. It had given place to another, which intensified as the dusk closed in on the early summer day.

There were sweet scents in the air after the heavy rain, as after another deluge, which he could remember, if he chose. Just now he chose to remember pleasant



things only. Life was before him, and the woman beside him, whose nearness stirred his pulses, was his wife. He looked at her many times, and knew whenever her eyes rested upon him. He liked the darkness that began to shut out the world from him and her. When it was denser under trees, the lamps played upon it. Moths flapped past, and caught the light upon their wings. Bats were abroad, and took their darting flight overhead. One flew close to Hannah's face, and she gave a little cry of alarm, and then laughed. With his arm Peter drew her towards him.

"Lean your head against me," he whispered.

She did so.

"Tired?"

"No."

"You are comfortable like that?"

"Yes." She gave a sigh of contentment.

He rested his head against hers for a moment.

The grains of rice slipped from the brim of his hat and danced upon her hand which lay in her lap. She smiled as she saw what they were.

"Kiss me," he said under his breath.

She kissed him on the left cheek, her eyes shining in the darkness.

A light in a cottage window made her think of a home. She was to have one of her own at last; every moment took her nearer to it. What good things the future held for her!

"Where are we now?" she asked presently.

"Close by Powell's Mill. There'll be a moon presently, but not before we get home, perhaps. How seldom you have been up at Maes Derwen, Hannah."

"Eight times in my life," she answered at once.

"You can tell the number."

"Oh, yes." She paused for a moment and thought.

"I remember every time," she said then.

"The first?"

"Yes, the first."

An owl flew out from a clump of trees close by the mill.

"See," said Peter, pointing with his whip. The bird disappeared in the darkness.

"What makes you remember?" he said.

"I went over when I was about sixteen, with a message from father to your father, an' while I was there you came in. You'd been fishin', an' you'd caught three trout."

"You remember that?"

"I can see you now. I'd seen you often enough before, but I'd never looked at you till then. I thought you was like the picture of David in father's big Bible. You'd the same slimness. I lay awake thinkin' of you, an' in the night I got up, an' found the picture to look at it."

Peter was silent for a moment.

"An' the next time?" he asked then.

"I walked over to see if I could see you. I'd no excuse. I just wanted to look at you, an' if I could,

I wanted to touch you — your hand or your coat, or something of yours."

"Did you see me?"

"I thought I was n't goin' to find you, an' I went up to the house, an' saw your sister, an' I waited an' waited in case you should come in, but you did n't, an' at last I had to go. I thought I'd pass through the stackyard. There was a rick bein' made, but none of the men was about. I saw something in the straw, an' I thought it might be you. There was a ladder against the rick, an' I looked round to see as there was nobody lookin', an' I climbed up, an' I found you lyin' there asleep."

"What did you do?"

"Shall I tell you?"

"Yes."

"I looked at you for a long, long time. You did n't move. Your hand was lyin' on your chest just by me. I looked at that for a long time, too."

"What for?"

"It was yours."

"Well?"

"Then I did something more than look. I touched it."

"How?"

"So lightly."

"I was sleeping?"

"You did n't wake. I touched it — shall I tell you?"

Peter nodded.

"With my lips."

The trap jolted over a stone in the road. Hannah was jerked forward slightly. She returned to her former position leaning her head against her husband's shoulder.

"Then I went up another step of the ladder, an' I bent down, an' I laid my face very gently on your breast. You did n't stir. I could feel your heart beatin' an' your breast risin' an' fallin' as you breathed. Then, for fear you should wake, — though I half felt then as if I did n't care whether you did or not, — I got up. I looked at your face again. I could n't leave you without touchin' that."

This was a revelation to Peter. He heard with astonishment. But the spell of the woman was upon him.

"After that," said Hannah, "I kept away for a long time, because, as I came down the ladder, your sister came into the yard, an' I did n't know but what she'd seen me. I don't know now whether she did or not. Anyway she did n't like me. Then your father died, an' it was just then that father married again an' I went away for a year. When I came back, you used to come up to the New Farm pretty often, till you suddenly began to keep away. During that time I went over to Maes Derwen three times. I remember each one; that makes five. The other three are the day of Clover's weddin', an' the day I called upon Miss Vaughan, and the once that I've been since I've been engaged to you. So I've been to Maes Derwen eight times. At the ninth I come there to stop."

"To stop," said Peter. "An' you 've loved me all this time?"

"Even as I have hated you," said Hannah, laughing softly.

"Hated?"

"Sometimes I 've loved and hated you at the same moment."

"When?"

"I hated you when I had kissed you in the straw. I felt I could have killed you, so I could move you. Your sleeping while I was burnin' there beside you — consumed with a fire I could not quench — made me mad against you. I dared not wake you to tell you, lest you should drive me away. I hated you then. What right had you, who cared nothin' for me, to make me love you with so much pain?"

"You use strange words."

"I feel strange things."

Peter smiled in the darkness, and wondered what life held for him. The spell of Hannah was upon him, but had he ever known her? He kept silence, and lost himself in thought.

The moon appeared now over the ridge in the hills. A peak was touched with silver. Five minutes later the trap turned in at the farm gate.

"Welcome to your home, my wife."

While Peter went round to the stable, Hannah, trembling and excited, ran up to her room to change her dress, and to see what damage she had done to it. Her box had arrived, and Jane Marton helped her



to unpack it. Hannah took off her white satin shoes, and, without looking at them, she put them away. She had expected to find a rent in her gown, but there was none that she could see. While she was changing it for a plain grey dress, Jane ran down to the kitchen to attend to the supper.

Peter's voice sounded presently at the foot of the stairs, calling.

Hannah called back that she was coming. Fastening a brooch, she came to the head of the staircase.

"I'm just ready," she said. "I only waited to see where my dress was torn; but, would you believe, it is n't torn at all!"

"That's right."

"It's strange, too, for I made sure I heard it tear."

"Your mother thought so."

"Yes, father's wife thought so."

The matter dropped. Peter saw that her hands were trembling so greatly that she could scarcely direct them. Her voice was a little husky. He beckoned her with his eyes. The brooch caught at last with a click. She descended to him slowly. He waited. When she reached the bottom step he held out his arms. She shut her eyes and let herself fall towards him. Not a word was spoken. Her lips found his lips; her arms his neck, and entwined themselves about it. The response to his passion was absolute — anticipative, even. His pulses leapt, the blood bounding through his veins. Then, in the midst of his excite-

ment, a cold thrill of horror passed through him. Her arms and lips choked him. The revulsion of feeling was momentarily complete.

Was it Mary, after all, who was the chaste woman?

## CHAPTER XXX

THE year moved on to full summer. Gardens grew bright with flowers. The humming of the bees in the limes outside Mary's cottage became, as in the days when Peter had come to court her, a sound that made a background of sound to all sound. Mary looked and listened and lived peacefully.

Then ragwort and knapweed, yarrow and mallow, wild snapdragon and geraniums, flecked the hedgerows with colour. Convolvulus and traveller's joy trailed over thorn and nut and elder. Sorrel looked like rust. Deadly nightshade lurked in darker places, and seemed to light them with a red flame. Blackberries passed through the stages that turn flowers to fruit.

Harvest came on. The valley and the uplands were yellow with grain. Men and women worked in the fields. Children gleaned in the evenings.

Every sow had now a litter. Little black pigs and little white pigs, and little pigs of black and white, trotted along the roads after portly mothers.

Autumn came on, and painted the woods. Then it was that disquieting rumours reached the New Farm and Aberllwyn and Maen Gorsedd from Maes Derwen. Jane Marton said, "Oh —" and looked wise, and "Yes, indeed, —" and was reticent. With a little pressing, however, she reported disturbances and de-

pressions ; soon, actual storms. Loo Hughes saw Hannah one day with brows of thunder. Miss Hughes was not reticent — rather, was she frank and outspoken. The news went round. By winter it was common gossip in the village that the marriage was not turning out well.

Mary did her best to stem such talk. A woman of less generous heart would have seen in the disaster of her enemy a victory for herself.

At Maes Derwen, in truth, life was passing strangely. In the six months which had elapsed since Miss Vaughan retired in favour of the new mistress, the internal working of the farmhouse had been falling steadily into a state of disorganization, out of which, from time to time, Hannah made futile efforts to drag it. Her want of method was inherent. Peter put up with the discomfort of his home with sufficiently good grace, but she knew that he felt it, and also that, somehow, in the days upon which he had fallen, it seemed to him a small matter ; her failure to preserve any lasting order sufficed to turn her thoughts inward, where they fretted like a covered sore. Things went badly in the dairy. She did not look after the maids, and butter and cheeses declined in quality. Hannah would be in bed and sleeping at a time when Clover and even Miss Vaughan had got through some hours' work. The profits of the farm fell off in consequence. When Peter, who had seen that neither exhortation nor remonstrance worked any lasting good, said that it could not be helped,

Hannah, conscious that the fault was hers, ground her teeth. The sense that he felt that relatively the thing was of small consequence enraged her against him.

A message from Mr. Alison's housekeeper, commenting unfavourably upon some dairy produce which had been supplied to the Rectory from Maes Derwen, must have occasioned him some annoyance. Such a thing had been unknown in the old days. When, though she was sure it vexed him that there should be cause for complaint, he forbore to say much to her on the subject, Hannah was more incensed than if he had rebuked her.

He knew that rebuke was useless. She knew that he knew it. She hated him just then. Presently a graver charge was preferred against Maes Derwen.

Certain butters supplied to other customers in the neighbourhood were found to be short of weight. Hannah denied all knowledge of the matter, but was proved, after accusing others of falsehood, to have resorted to the expedient of covering a deficiency in amount by giving fourteen ounces to the pound.

The fraud was elementary and clumsy. The motives for it were in themselves so trifling that if she had chosen to admit her fault, Peter would in all probability have found a ready excuse for her, but as it was she alienated his sympathy. He knew her to be untruthful. The incident was one of many that marked her want of principle.

She became unhappy and vengeful. She set herself to work evil.



Yet Hannah, who had equal claims with others to happiness, loved her husband, and hungered for him while she pushed him from her. She saw the gulf deepen and broaden, and knew that it was her own nature that daily separated her from him more widely. This knowledge served but to enrage her. Of very love and passion she started many a quarrel which she knew would turn and tell in its issues against herself alone.

She was like the wounded snake that bites itself to further torment.

The gulf had showed itself as a tiny rift early in the days of their life together. Hannah thought she knew of it the first. She shuddered one day, and caught her breath. When the yawning width of the chasm between them was patent to them both, she saw that passion for a time at least would have the power to bridge it.

But when passion was dead, what then? By so slender a thread did she hold Peter! She had wanted him for all eternity, and she held him by the thread that must break. She lashed herself to frenzy at the thought and at another which came with it hand in hand. There was a Peter she could not reach nor touch. She could guess at him only as one, looking at the moon, may guess at the nature of the side turned away.

If he was not to be hers wholly, she could make havoc of his life.

Paroxysms of impotent rage, such as she had

never displayed, even in her fiercest encounters with her step-mother, would now seize her, and be directed against the husband whom she loved.

Mrs. Rees, witness one day of her fury, thought of the blow forgiven long since, but not forgotten, and went home to the New Farm trembling for the tragedy that overhung Maes Derwen.

Peter, exasperated to the limit of his patience, went out sometimes from the presence of his wife, and, in the open fields, stretched his limbs as one long cramped, or drawing the air deeply into his lungs, gave a gesture with his hands, as if he would brush away the recollection of some horrible dream. Often he laughed aloud, the same strange laugh which Mary once had heard.

Clover went over to Maes Derwen, and came away with red eyes. She turned in to Mary's cottage and broke down. She was too full of what she had seen to keep silence.

"It's worse than I thought," she said.

Mary listened with an expression of pain. She said something that was kind of Hannah, finding an excuse for her, since the trouble seemed to be of her making, and pointing out that the first year of marriage was proverbially a difficult time.

"They'll settle down into each other's ways later on, you'll see."

Clover shook her head. "Never, never, never!" she said. Her thoughts went to the disordered house. "Mother'd turn in her grave if she could see Peter's

home. I did n't dare go into the dairy. What I saw in the kitchen was too much. But it's not the untidiness an' the discomfort — that's bad enough, in all conscience, but it's not the worst. Peter said nothing; don't you let me make you think he complained. He did n't say a word. He's not one to speak of his trouble. But his life is miserable; any one can see that."

"Things will be better after the baby's born. There's nothing that draws a woman's heart to her husband like that."

Mary coloured as soon as the words were out of her mouth.

"I've heard that," she added.

Clover laid a hand on hers.

"You know it," she said gently.

Mary looked down.

"I was alone by that time," she answered.

Clover's hand pressed hers.

"And yet," Mary said, after a pause, and speaking low, "it was true, even with me. It softened me, and helped me to forgive. It was like a sign of God's pity and forgiveness to me. I had been all alone."

She turned away, and bit her lip.

"I've never thought of Peggy in any other way. I cannot. I don't believe I am meant to."

It was the first time she had raised the veil of her reserve for Clover.

"I should have liked Peter to have such a wife as you," Clover said.

"You only mean if things had been different. You don't mean me at all."

"Yes, I do. I mean you."

"As I am?"

"As you are."

But Mary did not tell how, had she chosen, she might have been Peter's wife.

## CHAPTER XXXI

AT Maes Derwen matters went from bad to worse. Hannah, at such times as she could get away from herself sufficiently to be able to regard her marriage from the point of view of an outside observer, saw the shipwreck she was making of it with a sinking heart. But she had set herself to work mischief. Perhaps, in truth, she was less responsible for her own unhappiness, and the estrangement of Peter, than even she supposed. The physical taint which evinced itself in the defective rim of her ear was possibly accompanied by some moral twist which found expression in perverse imaginings. Be this as it may, the young woman, in whom a new life was forming with all its attendant mystery, battered upon her chances of peace as with clenched hands, or stamped upon them with angry feet.

She hung on Peter's neck or she tried to wound him. She called him by every endearment or she railed against him. Jenny Brecon's name was often in her mouth, and, in time, the name of Mary Redwing.

Peter's face changed when Mary's name was spoken. She observed this, and brooded upon it till a consuming jealousy of Mary burnt in her. Then, like a fanatic inflicting wounds and searings upon his own flesh, she tortured herself in the effort to drive the iron into the soul of her husband.



This jealousy was retrospective. Peter had at one time preferred Mary to her. That sufficed to feed the flame she had kindled within. She taunted him with the slur upon Mary's name.

"You did n't know what she was when you took walks from Borderhampton with her, and carried her parcels. It makes me laugh when I think of it — you that turned off Jenny Brecon!"

The look which Peter's face assumed when Mary was assailed provoked Hannah to further venture. There was a warning in it which she chose to disregard. The risk lent zest to the sport. She was like a child teasing with a straw some great animal that at any moment may turn and rend it.

To Peter, controlling himself of set will, the very air was charged with a tale of impending disaster. Every encounter with Hannah left him wondering whether the next would be that which would have dire issue. A conviction gained with him that, at some moment or other, the forces thus generated would outpass all possible restraint, and work a deadly thing. He did not suffer himself to guess what the end might be. There would be an end.

He felt as if he and Hannah were involved in a strange and fearful game of hazard, in which a throw of the dice would presently settle what he dared not contemplate. Or were they both the sport of some relentless power of evil that set the one to torment the other, and laughed at their helpless raging?

A year of marriage was dragging itself out. Pres-

ently Hannah's jealousy of Mary, which had been retrospective, took an active form. She became suspicious; questioned Peter as to his goings; watched him. He refused to be accountable to her. She followed him to Maen Gorsedd once, and with relief, oddly mingled with disappointment, saw him turn into the forge. But she was not satisfied. He knew he was watched, perhaps, and kept away from the woman's cottage? Thus did she fret herself with vague mistrust. Another day she met Mary herself, and turned and tracked her till weariness warned her that hatred and suspicion must wait upon health, and she dragged her feet homewards.

That night a touch of weakness softened her. Peter tended her with the gentleness of a woman. She wept and begged his forgiveness for the unhappiness she knew she caused him.

Peter responded in a moment. He was sorry for his wife, and he knelt beside her bed, and put his arms tenderly about her.

"Oh," she sobbed, "I want you to be happy, an' I want to be happy, an' I make you miserable an' myself, too." She sobbed like a child.

He tried to comfort her. "Things will be better by and by."

He whispered something into her ear.

A degree of solace seemed to come to her with his words. She stroked his hand.

"It frightens me when I think of it," she said, after a time. "But I should n't mind that; I

should n't mind anything, if we could be happier. Do you think we ever shall? Do you think we ever shall?"

He felt a renewal of hope.

"Let us try," he said.

"It rests with me. You mean that. I know it myself. But you madden me sometimes. Why do you? Why?"

"How do I, Hannah?"

"I don't know. I can't get near you. I'm further from you now than before you married me. What is it? What keeps you away from me? Oh, it's not your fault. It's me. I madden myself. There's a devil inside me sometimes. I've let him get hold of me. I don't know what I'm doin' or sayin', when he's got me. He makes me hate you, when all the time I love you; an' he makes me want to hurt you, and when I hurt you, I hurt myself ten times more."

"Keep him out," whispered Peter. "Try to keep him out."

"If I could!"

Something approaching to an understanding seemed to establish itself between husband and wife that night. Peter devoted himself to her. He brought food to her bedside, and coaxed her to eat. She went to sleep in time. Then, as he stood for a few moments looking at her, his eyes grew suddenly dim.

"My poor wife," he said to himself; "my poor Hannah."

But the peace did not last many days. Hannah

was about again on the following morning, and within a week, despite Peter's constant endeavour to preserve pacific relations with her, — an endeavour the more strenuous in that Hannah's state of health predisposed her to excitement, — the war had broken out afresh. The horrible feeling that a climax, or a crisis, was at hand returned to him. It had never been so strong as when the anniversary of his wedding-day drew near.

It was on the eve of the year of marriage that events justified his fears.

Hannah had been up to tea at the New Farm, and was returning home in the twilight, when she came upon her husband talking to some one in the roadway. She recognized the dressmaker, and, drawing back at once into the shadow of the hedge, she watched them till they parted. She neither heard nor saw anything to which all the world might not have been witness. The meeting between her husband and Mrs. Redwing, as the evidence of her ears and eyes informed her, had been purely accidental. Still they had met and had talked — her husband and the woman she hated! She hurried home across the fields, and reached the farm before Peter. She stood at the gate, and watched him coming up the road. He walked slowly, with his eyes on the ground. A disappointed man, one would have said — a man who had weighed his life and found it wanting.

Hannah noted his aspect with a stab of acute pain.

He did not observe her presence till he was close upon her. She saw recognition dawn in his absent eyes. It was not the glad look of the lover who sees the subject of his thought suddenly before him.

"Your thoughts ain't to sell, I can see," she said abruptly, and paused.

Her words reminded her of a scene in which she had played an important part. Just so had Peter looked, and with just such words had she saluted him, when he came towards her along the lane on the day which had made her his affianced wife. She reviewed the circumstances of the occasion, and jumped to sudden conviction. He had come from Mary then.

Peter looked at her with surprise. At her words, his thoughts also wandered vaguely (but on a trail of fuller knowledge) to the same chain of events that arrested and held those of his wife. Then, for the first time, it struck him that perhaps in marrying her he had done her a wrong. The idea was new to him. He continued to contemplate her as he turned it over in his mind. Hannah looked at him strangely the while. His expression softened. He went up to her where she stood at the gate, and put his hand on her shoulder. She shook it off.

"Why do you do that?" he said.

"I don't want it touchin' me."

"I thought we were goin' to try to be better friends."

"You said so."

"I hoped it."



"I daresay you hope lots of things."

"Hannah, Hannah, Hannah, don't speak like that. Do you forget all you said to me the other night? I thought then we were goin' to understand each other at last."

"I believe I do understand you at last." She regarded him steadily.

Dusk was stealing over the landscape. The west still held the colours with which the sun had stained it in a death of blood and gold. The trees stirred in a gentle breeze.

"We've got to live our lives side by side," said Peter, "whatever happens. We've got to face that. Things have n't gone very well between us. Shall we make a fresh start? The troubles we get are mostly of our own makin', I believe, in this world. Troubles like this are n't sent, they're made, and perhaps we've both been busy makin' them. For my share, I'm sorry. Will you try to love me, Hannah?"

"I've always loved you," said Hannah; but she spoke, not as if she assented to what he had said, but as if, keeping something in abeyance or reserve, she answered a part only of what was put to her.

"Then the fault is mine."

"You've never loved me."

She said the words in the same tone. Peter felt somehow that she was temporizing. He wondered what she was holding back, and whereto what was passing would tend.

"Well," he said, "I have fallen short, I know,

of what I should be to you. I want to make amends. Can't we help each other, Hannah, to make our two lives happier?"

Hannah gave a laugh. It was like the sudden wind with its accompaniment of swaying trees and flapping shutters that precedes the bursting of a storm. Peter knew the signs of the tempest making itself ready to break. The temporizing of Hannah was the lull that comes first.

"You make pretty speeches," she said. "You think I'm to be blinded to what may be going on by any dust you like to throw in my face."

"What do you mean?" said Peter. "I want to throw no dust."

Hannah's laugh sounded again.

"'An' will you try to love me, Hannah?'" she cried mockingly, "when all the while you've come straight to me from that woman. Do you think I don't know?"

"There's nothing to conceal," said Peter. "I met Mrs. Redwing yonder in the valley."

Hannah ignored the interruption.

"And do you think I don't know," she went on, "that when you asked me to marry you, you had come straight from her, too? You'd been makin' love to her, but you married me. Why did n't you stop with her? You were too particular for that, but you're not too particular to carry on with her now that you're married to me. An' I know why. The reason ain't hard to find. You think you can go

just as far as you like, as she can't expect marriage of you now."

Peter's face had masked varying emotions as Hannah spoke. The thought that he had perhaps done her a wrong in making her his wife was still occupying him. It justified in a measure her attitude. But, at one suggestion in the charge she made, his eyes flamed with a light corresponding to the blaze of anger in hers.

"It was she who was particular," he said, losing for a moment the self-control that was wont to serve him in good stead. "I'd have married her, if she would have had me."

"That's not true," said Hannah. "You left her when you knew about her."

"How do you know that?"

"Never mind how I know. I do know, that's enough for me. I only tell you because it shows how much your word's to be trusted."

"What I said was true, for all that," said Peter, striving to be calm. "I can't tell how you know that I asked her to marry me, and that I went away when I heard what she had to tell me. I went away, to my shame. I kept away, to my shame, too, when all the village knew her story; but before all was done I had asked her to marry me again. I understand now why she would not."

"To your shame! You that turned Jenny Brecon off, and caused her to drown herself! I'll tell you something you'll p'r'aps hear to your shame, then.

Have you ever wondered who it was that took the trouble to find out about this Redwing woman? You can know now, if you like, that it was me — me, do you hear? — me, the wife of the man who's her lover this minute. If I never do another thing in life, I've that to console me. You was after her then, an' I hated her. I set myself to hate her, I set myself to wish from my soul that there was something against her, an' like an answer to a prayer, it came to me to know that there was. It wasn't long before I knew what it was, an' when I did, I gave it to Liberty Loo to publish. I thought it a fittin' thing as one of her own sort should take the story round."

Peter's face grew livid. His hands hung at his sides. Every nerve in his body was twitching. His eyes wandered from his wife's features, which were distorted by passion, to her figure. Then, lest he should be tempted to say or do that which he would regret, he opened the gate in silence, intending to go up to the house.

She set herself in his way.

"There's excuses to be made for Mrs. Redwing, is there?" she cried. "You should be judge of that. You were with her this afternoon — been with her often enough, I daresay, if the truth was known. An' I've just learnt that it was her leavin's that I got when you married me — the leavin's of a woman that only came here when some town or other was too hot to hold her."

A trowel, left by some one upon one of the posts

of the gate, caught her eye. In a frenzy of passion she snatched it up and struck blindly at her husband's face. The sharp metal hit him on the temple, inflicting a gash to which the blood started.

Peter seized her hands, and shaking the trowel from her slackening grasp, he pinioned them while his eyes dominated her. The look of murder left her face, and gave place to one of deadly fear.

"Are you goin' to kill me?" she said in a whisper, and quailing before him.

"I'm not goin' to hurt you, Hannah, but you are goin' to listen to me. I've borne with you for nearly a year. You've made my life a hell on earth. Perhaps I did you a wrong in marryin' you, so as to our unhappiness my tongue's tied, maybe. But you've taken into your lips, to befoul it, a name you're not fit to speak. Hear that, Hannah! You're not worthy to touch the hem of the garment of the woman you've reviled. Whatever her sin, her soul is white by the side of yours or mine. It was because her soul was clean that she refused to marry me, when, in my blindness an' grossness, I thought her sin defiled her, and I still wanted her —"

He paused, and caught his breath. The blood was streaming down his face. It ran into his eyes and dripped on to his coat. Hannah contemplated the red fountain with a fascinated gaze while she listened. When her husband's blood splashed on to the hands that held hers, she gave a shuddering cry, and shut her eyes. She swayed in his grasp.



“Oh,” she moaned. “Oh —”

Peter did not heed. He had not much to say, and Hannah must hear him to the end.

“And because she is pure,” he said — “yes, pure, in spite of what befell her — you need never fear that she will take me, such as I am, from you. We are husband and wife, an’ to the grave we are bound the one to the other. But hear this, Hannah, as God’s above me, the day you take her name again to drag it in the filth of your own imaginations, I shall leave you. You are my wife, an’ I’m bound to provide for you, but I’ll do it from America or Australia.”

He released her hands. She went to the gate, and hung upon it sobbing.

Peter wiped the blood from his eyes and face. He felt sick and dizzy, and he stumbled as he turned to go to the house.

## CHAPTER XXXII

PETER went indoors. He was weakened by loss of blood, and he was in considerable pain. He lit a lamp, and went up to his room. His face was streaked with crimson streams. He gave an exclamation of surprise and disgust as he saw it; and having divested himself of his coat and waistcoat, he filled a basin with water, and proceeded to remove the stains from his face and hands. His wound was deeper and more severe than he had supposed, for excitement had deadened his feeling at the time of receiving it, and he saw that it would be necessary for a doctor to close it, possibly with stitches, and otherwise to attend to it. He must account for it as best he could; a fall against a ploughshare—a missile failing in its aim—the moment, perhaps, would furnish him with some such plausible explanation. He bandaged his head temporarily, deciding that he would ride into Derwen at once. He called to his wife, meaning to tell her of his intention. There was no answer. It was not an uncommon thing for Hannah to refuse to reply when he spoke to her. It would be better, perhaps, that he and she should not meet at once; so, when he had changed his clothes, he scribbled a line in pencil upon a scrap of paper, to let her know that he would be home in the course of the evening. Then

he ate a few mouthfuls of supper, and went round to the stable to saddle his horse.

The twilight had waned. He rode away in gathering darkness. As he turned into the lane, Hannah approached the house from the green meadow, where in acutest misery she had been pacing up and down.

The kitchen was empty, and she remembered that she had allowed Jane Marton to go home for the night, to be present at a christening which was to take place on the following day. She did not at once see Peter's note, but she saw several dark spots on the floor glistening in the light of the lamp. She began to cry again at the sight. It reminded her how near she had been to murder. She leant against the door that led to the stairs, crying softly, and wondering how to approach Peter, who she thought was in the room overhead. How would it be possible to express to him the completeness of her penitence? She could never forgive herself; could she hope that he could ever forgive her? Was the wound still bleeding? Oh, the awful sight of the blood pouring down his face and dripping on to his coat. She lived again through the hideous moment of the blow. She had been so near to murder.

The silence of the house arrested her attention. There was not a sound upstairs. The clock ticked with unusual loudness, surely. What if Peter had fainted from loss of blood? What if — In the silence, the clock ticked like the throbbing of a heart. She

looked round the kitchen ; Jane Marton had laid supper, as she had been bidden, before her departure. The lamp stood on the table—Peter must have lighted it, and put it there. But where was he now ? Where was he ? Hannah pulled herself together with a start. She opened the door and ran upstairs calling him by name. All was dark. She found matches, and with trembling fingers she lit a candle. He was not there. His clothes lay together in a heap upon a chair. She called again, as she took in the details of the room. She ran out and hunted for him high and low, calling him the while. By the time she found his pencilled line, which lay upon the supper-table, she was unstrung, and it was some moments before she could see to read it. When she had mastered the few words, and knew that nothing terrible had happened, a reaction caused her knees to give under her, and she sank down on to a chair, and sobbed hysterically. Thus she remained for several minutes, conscious of nothing but her wretchedness—if, indeed, she was even actively sensible of more than that she had cause for wretchedness. She could hardly be said to be thinking coherently. Her state was one of semi-torpor, in which the prolonged sobbing that shook her body was almost mechanical.

In time she came to a sense of her situation, and the power of thought returned to her. She recollected what she had done. She looked at her right hand. Was it possible that her hand had laid itself to the trowel—the first implement it could reach—to do

Peter grievous injury? Her hand? What power from a lower world had possessed it? Had something else outside herself entered into it, and impelled it to the deadly action? She gazed at it intently. It was a strong hand, with square nails. It was not reddened by work, as the hands of most of the farmers' wives of her acquaintance. It was fairly white. There was a wise woman out in the country that lay on the other side of Death's-Head Bank, who had been able to see what she called the mark of Cain upon the forehead of an infant which ailed, and had been brought to her to cure. Hannah had often heard her mother tell the story. No one but the wise woman of Caer Coch could see speck or spot upon the baby's forehead, but she could see the unholy sign. The child lived to go to the gallows for the murder of his own father. What if the white or whitish hand at which Hannah was gazing were in reality, for such as could see with prophetic vision, marked with the scarlet sign? With a twitching of her fingers, Hannah remembered the blow that selfsame hand had struck before. Then, as in the recent frenzy, her hand had seemed but the instrument of a force she could not control. She had heard of supernatural possession. Such things were known. A girl in Aberllwyn had been entered by a spirit, which obliged her to dance till she dropped. No one that Hannah knew remembered the incident personally, but James Humphrey and Mrs. Wynne could recollect the time when the story had been credited generally. A mound at the side of a road



was supposed to mark the place where she was buried — hallowed ground having been denied her body in consideration of the belief that she had died in a devil's power. Hannah had heard of how she had screeched as she danced, and implored her friends to put an end to her. They could not hold her. Jig! jig! jig! arms and legs flying this way and that, and for all the world like those of a bobbing jack that you might buy at a fair, and make to caper by pulling a string, she had footed it for two days and nights, under the spell of the evil one inside her, till she dropped in exhaustion, and flopped here and there upon the ground like a wounded bird. Her limbs, it was averred, had fluttered and flapped even after the life was out of her, and her body was cold.

Hannah shuddered. She looked at her hand as at the unknown and foreign, and half expecting some strange manifestation of its league with evil, she fancied that a red wave, showing through the skin, as wine through glass, and swelling the veins as it passed, surged into it from the wrist and disappeared at her finger-tips as though liquid must have poured from them. The phantasm lasted but a moment. Her tongue grew dry in her mouth. She started to her feet, and went to the lamp. Her hand was as usual. She knew she had imagined this thing. She tried to shake herself free of the unwholesome thoughts that were crowding upon her. Madness lay behind them. They left her for a space, and returned in other guise. An hour passed; she tried to read. The silence of

the house got a grip of her. It was like the silence of a death-chamber. The clock marked it out with steady ticks — a breathless interval between each and the next. People had died in this house — Peter's father and mother, and many another whose bones now lay in the churchyard. Miss Vaughan, doubtless, had records of them all.

It was in this room that Miss Vaughan had showed her the pack of black-edged cards. A recollection of the nameless illness of Elijah Williams forced itself upon her, and of the finding of Rosedew Thomas dead and grinning in the vault, with none to tell what her staring eyes had seen, or by what means the little imprisoned and starving woman had moved the leaden coffins. Hannah sat still in blank acquiescence as there came to assail her in her loneliness the thought of the birds tapping at the windows of the house of the dying David Vaughan, where Susan his daughter sat alert and apprehensive, watching by the sick, and looking over her shoulder. Something like a peck at a pane, the knocking of a rose-thorn on the glass at the touch of the breeze, startled a cry from Hannah. She must stir herself, or she would lose her reason in this empty house. When would Peter come back? There was not a living soul within half a mile of Maes Derwen. Oh, why had she allowed Jane Marton to go out this evening, of all others?

She tried once more to shake herself quit of the paralyzing nervousness that oppressed her. It was

time for supper, but she had no appetite for food. She ate a morsel or two of bread and cheese, but they nearly choked her. Peter might like something when he came in; she would not put away the things, but there was other work with which she might employ herself. She fetched a damp cloth, and wiped away the stains from the floor. They led her to the stairs, and up them. She went trembling, wiping a drop off every second or third step. She settled the room then, and busying herself, she succeeded in laying something of the terror that had threatened to overwhelm her. A sort of defiant courage came to her, and she moved about as noisily as she could, to show herself that she was not frightened. But it needed the slipping only of a towel from the rail on which she had hung it with incomplete balance, to make her heart jump, and to take strength from her legs. Fear lay behind the bold front with which she was trying to deceive herself.

Fear of what? She could not tell — just fear. It began with the horror of herself. She braced her nerves with an effort, and continued her work. Peter's changing had been hurried, and a drawer in which he had rummaged for linen, perhaps (so Hannah guessed), wherewith to bandage his forehead, stood open with its contents disarranged and protruding. She went over to it, and began to tidy it carefully. She was not in a normal state, nor Peter either. For Peter to have made confusion, and for Hannah to be setting to rights, was such a reversal of the usual

order as in itself marked the oddness of the day's events. She had some fine cambric handkerchiefs, part of her step-mother's wedding present to her. They were in this drawer. Their delicate texture would have made one of these the very thing to put next the broken skin. If only Peter might have taken one of them! It would be a sign to her that he did not mean to cut himself adrift from her altogether. There should be a dozen of these handkerchiefs. She had never used any of them. She counted them with shaking fingers — eleven. She might have miscounted in her eagerness. She took them up, and told them singly. Eleven! He had taken one, then. In her excitement the circumstance assumed a significance out of all proportion to any it might have borne. He was not going to cast her off. In time he might forgive her. She gave a little cry. The twelfth was there, after all — had fallen beneath other things. It was not, then, to find soft linen of hers, and show her that he bore her no ill-will, that he had hunted the drawer. He had probably been looking for some special handkerchief of his, and, failing to find it amongst his own things, — Hannah knew her carelessness to be accountable for many a mislaying, — had sought and found it, possibly, amongst hers. Disappointment weighed her down. She bundled the things back into the drawer, and tried to shut it. Something impeded its passage. She pulled it open, and saw that at the back of it a parcel was pushed up out of its place. She was about to press it down

when the thought occurred to her that she did not know what it was. She unrolled it. Ah, to be sure, her white satin shoes—the shoes in which she had been married a year ago to-morrow. What things the year had held! It was not for nothing that the rain had rained upon her wedding, and that a funeral passed it in the village street. She fell into a reverie. Through it she felt—heard—the silence of the house. The coffin's grim shape under the tarpaulin on which the rain splashed, the bearers, the mourners following, the solemn tramp of their feet, the thought of the body stiff and cold in its grave-clothes, and the darkness of its black case—a recollection of these things sent a shivering through her.

Her mind ran on death to-night. She could not get away from the shadow of the pall that seemed to hang over her. The candle flickered; the room was full of shadows. She was moved to look over her shoulder as Susan the watcher had done. Nothing stirred in the house or outside. Such breeze as there had been had dropped.

She was still holding the parcel in her hand. She would put it away, and go back to the kitchen, where at least there was more light. She was rolling up the paper, when an impulse, for which she knew no motive, caused her to take the shoes out to look at them before putting them away. She slipped the paper off them, and it fell rustling to the ground. They were pretty shoes. One of them was slightly soiled as by wet gravel. She remembered that her



step-mother had predicted some such fate for them, if they were worn in the rain. The other was stained, too, but right across. How strange a stain — not a stain — the satin was split from side to side !

How ? When ?

As in a flash, there recurred to her the sound she had heard as she put her foot upon the step of Peter's cart to drive home with him from the New Farm. She had thought her dress was torn, and had been able to find no rent in it. It was this that she had heard — the splitting of her shoe.

Another fatal portent ! Superstition overwhelmed her as a flood. There was more than chance in the heaped presages of evil that had attended her wedding-day. Either Peter or she must be going to die. The gossip of the village had reached her ears. The meeting with the funeral spoke of death for one of them within the year. The year would be up to-morrow. Perhaps Peter's wound was fatal, and she had killed him. The split shoe threw the lot to her. Panic seized her. With a scream she dropped the shoes, which struck the candlestick in their fall, and knocked it, candle and all, into the drawer. She did not pause to see what she had done. She rushed from the room and down the stairs. But one idea possessed her now. She must be where there were people. She ran out of the house. Habit turned her steps towards her old home. Running and walking, running and walking, she made her way towards the New Farm. Under trees the darkness was to be felt. She stumbled

here and there on the road. As she neared the churchyard that at a certain place bordered it, a recollection of the fear with its sense of portention that had once seized her here, and spurred her to blind flight, came so vividly to her that a cry was shaken from her lips. Something was going to happen. Her eyes darted to the churchyard. A sunk fence divided it from the road, so that graves were on a level with her face. Over a mound there seemed to her starting eyes to be a strange flame playing. Lambent, volatile, liquid, and burning blue at the base, it fluttered from mound to mound like a butterfly or the visible breath of corruption.

What Hannah saw was never known — whether a thing of her own conjuring or an *ignis fatuus* that may have been visible in the summer night above the damp and hot ground of the ill-drained graveyard. For her it was but one thing : the fatal corpse-candle of which she babbled in her delirium, when she lay for the rest of that night hovering between life and death in her old room at the New Farm.

## CHAPTER XXXIII

PETER did not try to think much as he rode into Derwen. He still felt dizzy, and his temples were throbbing. The trotting of the horse so aggravated his discomfort that most of the way he found himself obliged to travel at a walk.

In Derwen he put up his horse at an inn — choosing one at which he was less well known than at the others — and proceeded on foot to the doctor's house. The master was not in, he was told, but was expected every minute. Peter said he would wait. He was shown to a room, and sat down. The servant turned up the gas, and withdrew. There were some books on the table, and a few illustrated papers of dates of various degrees of remoteness. Peter looked through one or two, and after he had tired of them, he closed his eyes and waited in inaction. He heard sounds of family life in the adjoining room, intermittent talking, a little laughter, presently the playing of a piano. The music soothed him at first. That was an air he knew. It was followed by something that he did not — a perverse, lawless thing, in broken time, that fretted him he could not have told why. It sent his thoughts to strange moments in his life with Hannah. He was glad when it ended abruptly, like an unfinished sentence.

A footfall detached itself from the sounds in the

street, and stopped. A key was to be heard being fitted into a lock. A door opened and banged, and, a moment later, the doctor entered his study.

"Who is it? Mr. Davidson? Good-evening to you, Mr. Davidson. What can I do for you?!"

Peter rose to his feet. The doctor extended his hand.

"Good-evening, sir."

"An accident?"

"Yes, sir."

"Dear me, I'm sorry for that. Nothing serious, I trust. You look a bit pale, Mr. Davidson. Sit down, and tell me all about it. We'll take the bandage off, if you please. Yes. So—h'm. A bad cut. Deep. Ah—yes. How? An accident in the dusk? A fall, did you say? Your head striking the trowel—on the ground?"

"The trowel lies there now, sir."

The two men's eyes met.

"The trowel on its side?"

"The edge—the blade cut me, sir, certainly."

"A bad fall, then, Mr. Davidson, or a sharp trowel."

"One should be careful in the dusk, sir."

"Yes, one should be careful in the dusk—and out of it, with such trowels about. You lost a good deal of blood?"

"A good deal, sir."

The doctor shook his head, smiling a little, and asked no more questions. Peter watched him gravely,

as he got together such things as were needed, and then sat very still as the operation of closing the wound and stitching it was performed.

The piano sounded afresh. The player, with wandering fancy, was straying now from air to air. Chords, or runs that seemed to fall from the notes like trickling water, led from one melody to another. Peter started.

"I am hurting you?"

"No ; it is n't that. Yes — perhaps. But it does n't matter."

The player in the next room had chanced, in his rambling, upon the tune to which Mary Redwing had fitted certain lines she knew.

"It never went," thought Peter ; "never, never. It never will go."

"We shall have done in a moment," said the doctor.

Peter remembered then. "Yes, sir," he said stupidly.

Bandages were applied to his head. An appointment was made for another interview, and some final directions given to him.

"And beware of those trowels."

"The same accident does n't often occur twice, sir."

"Well, good-night to you."

"Good-night."

Ten minutes later Peter was riding homewards. Even now he could not shake off the sense of impending disaster. He collected his thoughts. The



catastrophe to which his relations with his wife had been working was surely exemplified — if abortively — in the wound, the traces of which were hidden by white bandages. The blow, a small thing in itself, stood for what might have happened. It would mark a turning-point, surely, in the new and ill-starred fortunes of Maes Derwen. But his uneasiness prevailed, increased. It passed from his brain to his very limbs, coursing through his veins with his fevered blood. He urged his horse from a walk to a trot, from a trot, even though the roads were hard, to a canter. The dark country, hedges, gates, trees, scuttled past him in the strange ride against time. He knew not what intuition of the thing that was befalling, impelled him to haste. But hasten he must, and hasten he did. There were stars in the firmament above him, but no moon. Presently his eyes became conscious of something there besides stars, — a glare in the distant sky. A red cloud hung over a part of the valley. For a time he did not seem to get any closer to it. Presently he was riding more directly towards it. He began to connect it vaguely with the mental disturbance he was experiencing. It glowed, at times, as a coal that is fanned. Some one was coming along the road. Peter pulled up.

“Who’s that?” he asked.

A tramp approached him.

“Which way have you come?” Peter said quickly.

The tramp pointed in the direction of Maen Gor-

sedd, and said something about the Union at Derwen as his destination.

"What's that light, do you know?"

"I've been wonderin'. It's not as bright as it was. It shot up a while back like rockets. I could n't stop to go and see what it was. It'd be a rick burnin', I expect. Have you a trifle as you could give a poor man? I'd be very thankful, I'm sure."

"S-sh!" said Peter. "Listen!"

The tramp stepped into the middle of the road and then back. A sound of hoofs was approaching.

"A night of sharp ridin'," he said. "A man's got to keep a pretty smart lookout not to get himself run down in these parts, seemingly. First you canterin' along in the dark, an' now this one. H'm. Appears to be in a bigger hurry than what you was, even."

A horse ridden at a gallop came along.

"Who goes there?" shouted Peter.

"Can't stop!" was the breathless answer. "Fire!"

"Where?"

But horse and rider had swept by like the wind. The galloping hoofs sounded in diminishing distinctness. Peter did not wait. He himself was answering his own question.

"Not the house!" he cried aloud; "not the house! God, not the house! There's a woman in it. Hannah's in it. Save her! The stacks, if you like. Not the house!"

His thoughts rushed ahead of him. Hannah! where was Hannah? Would she be sleeping yet?

He had lost all count of time. Would the smoke have roused her? If not, there was no one near to warn her. His soul breathed a fervent prayer.

“Save her, God!” he prayed. “Save her because of what happened to-day! Save her, to let this be the turning-point in our two lives! Have mercy, God, and spare her!”

Then he thought of his home. He saw the farm-kitchen; the settle where his mother used to sit working in winter evenings; a certain old chair with a patchwork cushion that, as a child, he had known as “father’s chair”; the tall clock against which he and Clover had been measured in early days, and in the sound of whose ticking he had lived his life — was the fading glare in front of him the signal of the perishing of things dear to him as friends? The last half-mile he galloped as the other rider had galloped. His horse’s chest and sides were splashed with foam as he came in sight of the blazing farm.

A little crowd had collected.

“Mr. Davidson!” cried half a dozen voices. “We was wonderin’ where you was.”

“My wife!” cried Peter, jumping down, and throwing his reins to the nearest man. “Is Hannah with you?”

His eyes scanned the faces on which the red lights flickered. Heads were shaken. Peter looked at the blazing ruins in stupefaction; the roof had fallen in. Flames were shooting up into the sky from the inside

of the four gutted walls, that looked like a case to hold the furnace.

"Good God!" he cried. "She's not in *that*! Tell me, some of you, what you know. When did this thing happen? Where's Hannah? Where's my wife? Answer me, some of you, for God's sake!"

A woman's laugh made itself heard above the hissing of the flames, and old Mrs. Brecon hobbled out from the rest.

"It's like hell!" she cried, "is n't it? There'd be toastin' for any one in that. The devil an' his angels'd be pretty snug there, I daresay. An' it's to a place like this, yonder, as you think you sent my Jenny. You're wrong, Peter Davidson; she's washed in the blood of the Lamb, an' she's playin' her harp now in heaven."

Some one hustled the crazy woman aside.

"I don't believe there was any one in the house," said Mr. Roberts, approaching Peter. "I was up here as soon as most, an' I belief the house was empty. The fire seemed to have begun in the bedroom there. I saw the flames from up home there, an' I was come along as quick as I could, an' three or four with me. We could n't save much for you, but a thing or two out of the kitchen, for the floor broke through in a minute, an' then the whole place was in a blaze. Joe Morris, he ride off to Derwen fetch the fire-engine, though it wa'n't a bit of good. We drove the bull out into the meadow yonder, an' the three horses. Indeed, I don't belief there's a life

thing dead unless it would be a mouse or two ; an' the pigeons, as seemed right scared whateffer and was fly straight into the flames."

Others took up the tale. Peter heard a dozen accounts. The crowd augmented. People were coming up from Maen Gorsedd. Here were Liberty Loo and Abel Jones and Annie from the Cambrian Arms. Mrs. Owen arrived panting. Some of the women had shawls over their heads. The light of the fire played upon the scene, and threw shadows grotesquely. Faces glowed. Figures caught a rim of redness. Buckets that had been used at first in combating the flames, now lay about idle. Out of the furnace, like cinders from a crater, bits of charred wood, and ashes of all that was combustible, flew up into the sky, and descended in a smoky rain. The garden was trampled down, and bestrewn with hot wreckage. Bats and birds were disturbed, and darted or circled round the burning house. The tops of the trees were illumined as with Bengal lights.

Women were chattering. More than one made open allusion to the events of the wedding-day.

"An' the young bride—an' mother that was to be—a corpse now, an' roasted, perhaps, out of all knowledge before she'd been married a year!"

"For shame to you ; he'll hear you !" said a man—Mr. Owen.

"Hearin' won't take her poor body out of the flames if it's there !" said Loo Hughes.

"There's no one been killed," said Mr. Roberts



again. "I was here among the first, an' I'm right sure the house was empty, though, of course, we cannot tell for certain."

"Where is she, then?" said Annie, in an awed voice.

"What's he doin'?" said Loo Hughes.

All eyes turned in Peter's direction. Moving here and there in distraction, he had kicked something with his foot. He looked to see what it was. It proved to be a trowel. He picked it up, and threw it through a window into the bed of dwindling fires.

## EPILOGUE

A YEAR after the night that robbed Peter at once of wife and home, and left him with a little motherless child, Clover walked over to the cottage in which her brother had taken up a temporary abode.

"How's the buildin' gettin' on?" she asked.

"It's gettin' on."

He looked gaunt and solitary.

"It's no good," he said, after a pause. "I can't take any interest in it, nor in anything else here. I feel as if I was under a curse, an' the ground was cursed for my sake."

"Hush, Peter!"

"I do. If it was n't for my child, I'd throw over the whole thing, an' go to the colonies — anywhere where I could start fresh, an' get clear of all that hangs round me here."

Clover looked at her brother.

"Have you ever guessed what Hannah said to me the night she died?"

Peter was silent.

"Do you know why she made you promise that Mary Redwing should look after the child? I loved Hannah then. Have you ever wondered — as I have — what she said to her when she asked to see her alone?"

Clover's eyes filled with tears.

"I think I know. Yes, Peter, go abroad, if you must, but don't go alone. Peter, Peter, my dear, dear brother!"

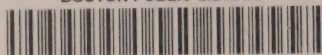
Peter was sobbing like a child.

**THE END**

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